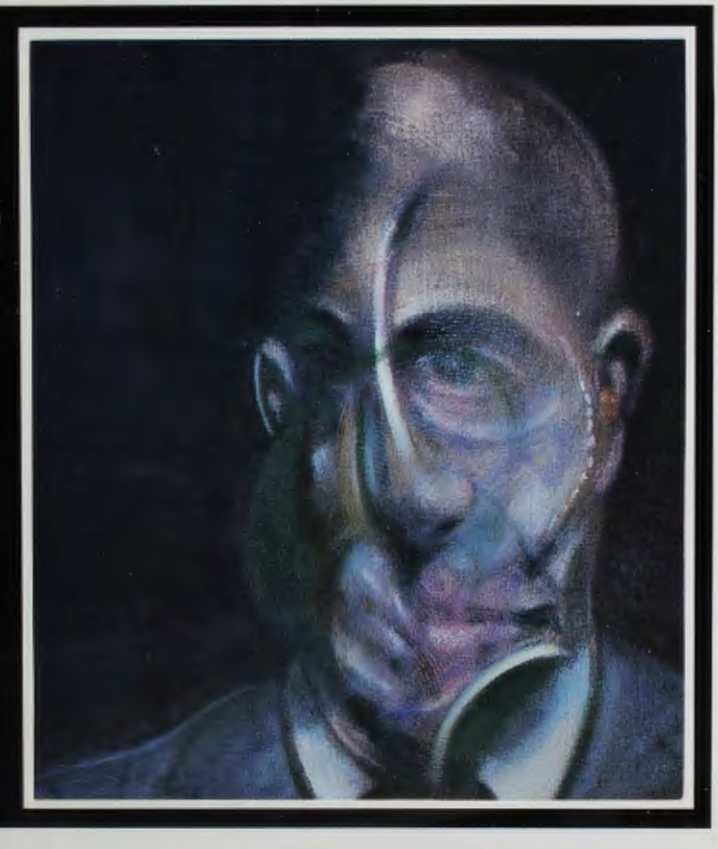
Sulfur 15

FEATURING NEW TRANSLATIONS OF MICHEL LEIRIS



POETRY BY MICHAEL PALMER, PETER REDGROVE, CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON AND BOB PERELMAN

JOHN YAU ON LEON GOLUB AND MARCEL DUCHAMP

PAPERS ON CESAR VALLEJO AND PABLO NERUDA

Clayton Eshleman

THE NAME ENCANYONED RIVER

Selected Poems 1960-1985

Introduction by Eliot Weinberger

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Cover: Francis Bacon / **Portrait of Michel Leiris**
Oil on canvas, 14 x 12 inches, Louise and Michel Leiris Collection
Color transparency courtesy of Marlborough Gallery, London

NEW TRANSLATIONS OF MICHEL LEIRIS

Edited by James Clifford, with translations by Clifford, Lydia Davis, Richard Sieburth, Paul Auster, and Michael Haggerty

THE TROPOLOGICAL REALISM OF MICHEL LEIRIS

by James Clifford

OEUVRE—verrou?

Last year Michel Leiris published a supplement to the idiosyncratic dictionary he had begun as a surrealist in the 1920s. *Langage tangage* consists of sixty pages of words with odd definitions followed by a meandering meditation on a lifelong mania for slipping words out of their semantic slots, provoking new senses based on plays of sound or graphic form. The dictionary's first installment appeared in *La Révolution Surréaliste* of 1925. Its title was a sample of the procedure: "Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses" ("Glossary: I squeeze my glosses there" . . . or perhaps more in the spirit of the game: "Glossary: my glosses' ossuary"). The word to be "defined," *glossaire*, is split in two: the first syllable, "glos," veering toward "glose" (gloss, critique, reflection) while the second, "saire" turns into "serrer" (squeeze, keep, lock up). Recombined as a new definition the troped syllables evoke Leiris's intimate dictionary, a collecting place for poetic turns and punning associations.

Fifty years later *Langage tangage* presses the point. Its title can be heard to say: "Language entangles you" (*Langage t'engage*) while simultaneously equating language with the "pitching" (*tangage*) of a ship or airplane. And if we are engaged, bound, turned and tipped by words, Leiris also suggests we may transgress or divert the official forms and meanings, shapes and articulations. Each displacement of the word "langage" ("tangage," "t'engage") is the result of a single small alteration. The slip of a phoneme or graphic trace is all it takes to start remaking the dictionary, dislodging senses. This latest "supplement" to a lifelong personal

glossary presented by the eighty-five year old Leiris is itself glossed as both a versatile form of divination and as simple tics of the glottis ("Souple mantique et simples tics de glotte – en supplement").

Throughout his career Leiris has been passionately engaged with, lured by language – language as voyage of discovery and entangling web, as pitching vessel of the self and swaying bridge to the others. Certain of his writings, like the *Glossaire* and most of his poems, work in and out of puns and private language: they are virtually impossible to translate. The rest can be approximated in English, and the new translations gathered here give a fairly representative overview of Leiris's large and still-changing oeuvre. Still, it must be said right away that no excerpt can do justice to the painstaking labor of a writer almost literally writing himself into existence – looping through dreams, ideas, memories, current events, the moment of writing . . . searching for a personal universe in a grain of sand, syllable, or snatch of song. This process is best followed at the inimitable slow pace of *La Règle du jeu*, Leiris's four volume, thirty-five-year project that elaborates not an autobiographical "life," but a "savoir vivre," a heightened mode of being and a personal ethic. (*La Règle du jeu*: rule of the game, of the I/*je*.) Only a scrap of this work upon which Leiris's literary reputation rests can be included here, the opening sections from its first volume, *Biffures* (Crossouts). Anglophone readers will have to wait until Lydia Davis's superb translation in progress has been published, by Sun Books. Then they will be able to compare *Biffures* with its immediate precursor *L'Age d'homme* (*Manhood*, translated by Richard Howard and recently reprinted by North Point Press) and thus begin to form an impression of Leiris's elaborate project.

The SULFUR collection includes essays, dreams, ethnography, texts on eroticism, art criticism, and passages from sequels to *La Règle du jeu* (the game continues). The selection and juxtaposition tries to give a sense of a remarkable oeuvre's diversity and process, showing its openness to cultural, historical, and interpersonal influences. For as Edmond Jabès suggests in his meditation on Leiris in Section 4, all committed writing about the self ends in vulnerability before the other. To live intensely through writing, as Leiris does, is to give ultimate power to the reader. There is no security: writing does not settle into stable dialogues. Again and again in the process of writing, Leiris discovers the alienating, exhilarating fact he first confronted as a child: "how articulated language, the arachnean tissue of my relations with others, went beyond me, thrusting its mysterious antennae in all directions." A constant oscillation between "inside" and "outside," self and other, is a constitutive force in Leiris's oeuvre. Though he turns to himself as the only topic he can write about with sincerity, his rule has the effect of expanding the "subjective" terrain to include everything that impinges on and draws out his words: the non-Western cultures he studies as an ethnographer, the political struggles in

which he is involved, the many intense friendships with writers and artists that weave themselves into his writing.

Any representation of an "oeuvre" misses this subjectivity conceived as process rather than product, writing rather than text. The inescapable problem of the autobiographer (who in shaping a "life," misses the actual life of the present) also bedevils any account of a writer's production. In an interview shortly before his death, Michel Foucault reflected on the notion of an oeuvre (he was being asked about his first book on Raymond Roussel): ". . . someone who is a writer does not simply create an oeuvre in books . . . his principal oeuvre is ultimately himself writing these books."[1] An emergent life-in-writing: this is what Leiris strives, through an exemplary series of works, both to analyze and to enact. In the last pages of *Langage tangage* he admits a fondness for his own published books, like a child's attachment to old toys. But he is "almost exclusively concerned with the work underway – the one that shows me I'm still alive, able to line out sentences that more or less stand . . ."

PARADIS – pure idée (ou parodie)

Born in 1901, Leiris grew up in comfortable Parisian bourgeois surroundings. His father was a small banker one of whose clients and friends was the wealthy eccentric, Raymond Roussel. As a child Leiris acquired a lifelong love for the theatre, and particularly for opera, an attachment that shows up everywhere in his writing. Images of theatrical sets, costumes (including his own excessive need to dress "well"), stage fright, and the miraculous art of performance pervade his work. Among the theatre pieces that impressed Leiris as a boy was Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* of 1911–12, a sumptuous and hermetic work of exotica. Later he became friendly with its author who in 1922 was beginning to be appreciated by a few surrealists. In response to a letter praising a much denounced performance of *Locus Solus* Leiris received a note from his father's friend beginning: "Thank you, my dear Michel, for your curious and interesting letter. I see that, like myself, you prefer the realm of Conception to that of Reality."[2]

Leiris had begun the study of chemistry. But he soon came under the spell of Max Jacob, whose dire warnings against the poet's life seem only to have increased the young man's ardor. At the Café Savoyarde in Montmartre a group of dada and surrealist artists and writers regularly dropped in on Jacob, and it was there in 1920 that Leiris met his lifelong friends André Masson and Joan Miró. He became a regular at their studios on the rue Blomet. Masson, particularly, encouraged him to write, providing illustrations for his first texts. Through Miró, Leiris came to know Picasso,

with whom he formed a lifelong attachment. He met also Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the cubists' influential dealer who, a brother-in-law by marriage, would later join the Leiris household. His priceless gallery and collection, having been passed to Leiris and his wife during the Second World War to avoid confiscation as Jewish property, would form the core of the Galérie Louise Leiris, a major art institution in the postwar period. For many years Kahnweiler and the Leirises shared a large apartment on the Seine near Pont Neuf.

Through Masson, Leiris joined the surrealist group, while keeping a certain distance from its center, Breton, Eluard, Soupault, and Co. (Leiris has always been peripheral in organizations, while remaining intensely loyal to friends.) In 1925, rather uncharacteristically, he became a momentary hero at the famous surrealist banquet for Saint Pol Roux, shouting anti-imperialist speeches from an upstairs window, then descending into a hostile crowd where he was arrested and manhandled by the police.[3] But such public displays of correct surrealist behavior were rare. During the twenties, Leiris concerned himself with poetry and with testing the limits of his own unsettled desires. A world of sexual obsessions, fetishes, brothels, and wild night-life is evoked with a kind of numb lyricism in *Manhood.* As a good surrealist Leiris recorded his dreams, and experimented with automatic writing. He started his *Glossaire* and wrote three more or less surrealist "narratives": *Le point cardinal, Grande fuite de neige,* and *Aurora.* These oneiric sequences pursued the metamorphoses of names and phrases, masks of a fragmented self fetishistically viewed as a "rendezvous of body parts." The influence of Nerval is evident, as is a magical or alchemical view of language derived from a variety of occult and exotic sources.

Beside these surreal fictions based on dream materials Leiris kept rather deadpan records of actual dreams, seen not as occult revelations but as waking *writing.* These were collected in 1945 and augmented in 1961 under the title *Nuits sans nuit et quelques jours sans jour* (*Nights as Day, Days as Night*). As Richard Sieburth nicely brings out in his selection and introduction below, Leiris's distinctive attitude toward dreams rhymes with his growing suspicion of the exotic. Avoiding the fabulous dream constructions of many other surrealists he cultivates a lucid, almost "objective," attention to (oneiric) dailiness.

Leiris was among the early defectors from surrealism during the schisms of the late twenties. By 1929 he had left the fold, along with Artaud, Queneau, and another close friend and important collaborator, Georges Bataille. The two struck a sympathetic chord when they met in 1924, and over the next two decades they pursued complementary research into the themes of transgression, sacrifice, the sacred, pollution, and various forms of *gaucherie.* They dedicated to one another their most important books on sexuality: *L'érotisme* (*Death and Sensuality*) and

Manhood. In the twenties both were exoticists, seeking among the Aztecs (Bataille) and in Africa (Leiris) alternatives to the reigning idealism of Western "Civilization."

In the twenties, jazz offered a source of revelation closer to home. Leiris, like many of his generation, found its apparently unchained rhythm and sheer theatrical presence irresistible. (See Section 5, below.) Raymond Roussel was wrong to say that he preferred the realm of "Conception" to that of "Reality." In fact Leiris was torn between the two poles and his life's work has been an endless, imperfect attempt to bridge the gap. A deep longing for human "contact," for "real" experience and erotic gratification, was continually blocked by a feeling of futility – an acute awareness of being condemned to a world of projected phantasms and simulacra, abstract, ideal substitutes for the objects of his desire. Leiris did not, like Roussel, respond by inhabiting a world of pure conception, submitting to strict protocols of composition and working only with their effects. While he shared Roussel's taste for the divinatory manipulation of language and like Bataille believed there could be no freedom apart from rules and constraints, Leiris continued to press "through" the screens that seemed always to separate him from life. He had married in 1926, a liaison often fraught with ambivalence. (But the marriage has endured for sixty years.) In 1929, feeling aimless and severely depressed, he entered psychoanalysis which he pursued until 1931. Then he bolted for Africa. Perhaps he could find there the direct human contact, the "freshness," lacking in a corrupt Europe.

During 1929 and 30 Leiris collaborated on a dissident surrealist journal edited by Bataille that combined art, cultural criticism and ethnography.[4] *Documents* brought him into contact with ethnologists like Marcel Griaule, Paul Rivet, and Georges-Henri Rivière (Leiris's chief contact with the Parisian world of jazz, who would, with Rivet, play a crucial role in reorganizing France's ethnographic and folklore collections). Griaule was busy with preparations for a flamboyant museum-collecting and ethnographic expedition across the sub-Saharan rim. He offered Leiris a place on the "Mission Dakar-Djibouti." Leiris jumped at the chance, and his experience during almost two years of fieldwork was recorded in an extraordinary journal, *L'Afrique fantôme.* Two excerpts are translated in Sections 1 and 2 below, from the expedition's most important stopping places, the Dogon settlement of Sanga (in what was then the French Sudan) and Gondar, Ethiopia.

The author of *L'Afrique fantôme* sums up what he found in Africa: "Few adventures, research that initially excites him, but soon reveals itself too inhuman to be satisfying, an increased erotic obsession, an emotional void of growing proportions. Despite his distaste for civilized people and for the life of metropolitan cities, by the end of his journey he yearns for the return."[5] The experience throws Leiris back on himself. There is no

escape, no authentic contact with Africa, only exotic phantoms. Finally, in the midst of studying a possession cult in Ethiopia he blurts: "I would rather be possessed than study possessed people!"[6] He returns to Europe and to what J.-B. Pontalis has called his "interminable psychoanalysis," an attempt no longer to escape but rather—something slightly different from psychoanalysis—to account for himself in writing.[7] *L'Afrique fantôme*, published in 1933, initiated Leiris's long, linked project of self-portraiture and analysis. During the mid-thirties he composed his perverse *Bildungsgeschichte*, a "Journey from Childhood into the Fierce Order of Virility," *Manhood*. At the same time he maintained his participation in social science, as always from the margins, attending seminars by Marcel Mauss and Maurice Leenhardt, publishing articles on his African research, and working, on and off, on his thesis, *La langue secrète des Dogon*.

RHÉTORIQUE—érotique

Leiris continued to cultivate an "ethnographic" attitude. But the "other," or a sense of difference, was no longer sought in a place of romantic escape or in a discrete object of scientific research. Rather, it was the product of a peculiar *attention* to what was close at hand. Writing of Raymond Queneau, another friend and dissident surrealist, Leiris describes the attitude in question:

> Raymond Queneau usually works at ground level as a prose writer, less as someone enamoured of the *elsewhere* than as an imaginative stroller on the paths and detours of the most down to earth reality which—an artist but without idealist tendencies—he shifts and unhinges in a way that makes it lose nothing of its immediacy. Instead of travelling in search of exoticism, scarcely knowing where we are, isn't it better to alter (distance, exoticize) what is nearby and that we know all too well? In sum, inverse the movement in a counter-exotic fashion—no longer depart from familiar shores for strange lands, but make the familiar suddenly swerve toward the strange. An operation whose instrument is language . . .[8]

But unlike Queneau—ethnographer/oneirographer of the suburbs—Leiris still felt the pull of non-Western realities. He remained deeply suspicious of Eurocentrism. Ethnographic work would still take him to Africa, and to the Caribbean—this time without illusions of escape. But it was only after World War II, with anti-colonial movements, that he was drawn again away from home.

In the late thirties he turned his attention to the near at hand, founding, with Bataille and Roger Caillois, a maverick and short-lived institution, the Collège de Sociologie.[9] This alternative to academic social science

attempted to bring "exotic" topics, like sacrifice and the sacred, to bear on present actuality. Leiris's own chief contribution to the Collège (before resigning because of qualms about loose standards of evidence and the danger of founding a coterie) was an essay on "The Sacred in Everyday Life." In this transitional text, soon to appear in English translation,[10] many of the topics later taken up in *La règle du jeu* are analyzed as components of a personal "sacré." Objects of unusual attraction and power (his father's revolver), dangerous zones (the racetrack), tabooed sites (the parental bedroom), secret spots (the W.C.), words and phrases with a special, magical resonance, and so forth—these sorts of data would evoke "that ambiguous attitude tied to the approach of something both attractive and dangerous, prestigious and rejected, that mixture of respect, desire and terror which can be taken as the psychological mark of the sacred."[11]

In *L'Afrique fantôme* Leiris sharply questioned certain scientific distinctions between "subjective" and "objective" practices. Why, he wondered, are my own reactions (my dreams, bodily responses, etc.) not important parts of the "data" produced by fieldwork? In the Collège de Sociologie, he glimpsed the possibility of a kind of ethnography, analytically rigorous *and* poetic, focussed not on the other but on the self, its peculiar system of symbols, rituals, and social topographies. As this methodical research took fuller form in *Biffures*, during the early forties, the analogy with social science became less explicit. But the bridge between self-portraiture and ethnography, blatant in "Le sacré dans la vie quotidien," was an important one. Cultural analysis, the experience and method of fieldwork, oriented his approach to his own subjectivity. In fact, Leiris brought certain habits of note-taking he learned in Africa directly into his work of self-portraiture.

Leiris had been charged with organizing the Dakar-Djibouti expedition's scientific records. He kept scrupulous fieldnotes and descriptive labels on cards which could be classified, re-shuffled and analyzed. After his African experience, he began to collect similar cards which, like good fieldnotes, covered every relevant aspect of the complex reality in question (here, the field of his own subjectivity). His notes included things not understood, what Malinowski called the "imponderabilia" of actual life. Moreover, Leiris has recalled that the most valuable thing he learned from psychoanalysis, despite a later rejection of all purely psychological approaches, was the value Freud gave, especially in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, to small, seemingly banal facts.[12] Leiris's "method" for writing *Le règle du jeu* involved the methodical collection of a heterogeneous data base:

> I have an enormous file which is constantly growing and where I note facts, memories, sometimes even aphorisms, ideas finally, things I rather confusedly feel are important to me and that should be used somehow,

but without knowing in advance just how they will be used, or how things will work out.[13]

In a giant "card game," a kind of patience, matches (*"marriages"*) are made between similar cards, or cards of like value to the player. These are collected in piles which, recopied, with constant crossouts, yield unexpected associations. There is no overall plan, the rule of the game is to proceed card by card. Only when a passage is considered final does the player move on. Thus the final text is not written over to conform to a post-facto narration or analysis, but instead the work records, in its movement, the rhythm and manipulations of the writing—a divination or abduction.[14] The result is an objective subjectivism, a realism based on facts (nothing made up, only connected and written over) portraying a process of research as it remembers, discovers, associates and arranges. Language is always both means and end, an autonomous, reflexive reality rather than simply a mode of representation or expression.

Leiris's realism excludes all fabulation. (He had once tried to write a novel, before *Manhood*, but found he was incapable of inventing characters distinct from himself.) Moreover, in his properly ethnological work, he also avoids any fictionalizing, or the importation of obvious "literary" elements. Throughout his mature writing one finds only the search for a complex lucidity and an almost documentary attention to facts of observation, language, and feeling. This attention simultaneously records and disorients, part of a realism that sees "facts" as performances, tropic productions, or heightened, cut-out elements (fetishes). Like the dreams of *Nuits sans nuit*, reality presents itself rhetorically. It is the result of *fixations*, simultaneously objective and erotic. The result is a writing, as Simone de Beauvoir has observed, always characterized by a peculiar mix of lyricism and distance.

The participant-observer strains toward presence, by means of detachment.

> "[. . .] a straight nape, falling vertically from the back of my head like a wall or cliff, a typical characteristic (according to the astrologists) of persons born under the sign of the Bull: a broad, rather bulging forehead, with exaggeratedly knotty and projecting temporal veins . . . My eyes are brown, the edges of the lids habitually inflamed; my complexion is high; I am disconcerted by an irritating tendency to blush, and by a shiny skin. My hands are thin, rather hairy, the veins distinct; my two middle fingers, curving inward toward the tips, must denote something rather weak or evasive in my character."

In these passages, which open *Manhood*, Leiris's body becomes another symbolic artifact, an occasion for "oneirographic" description.[15] The subject of *L'Afrique fantôme, Manhood, La règle du jeu, Nuits sans nuit*, and *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia* is less an intimate or private self, an inner soul revealed, than it is a kind of personal "culture," a collection of meaningful artifacts to be connected, understood, and rewritten.

For Leiris, writing itself comes to be, like the dream for Nerval, a "second life." But it is a lucid, waking practice, a research that includes dreams (stripped of any metaphysical privilege) along with various other categories of significant "data." Since the field of potential research includes professional ethnographic work, travels, friendships, daily experiences and political engagements, Leiris's writing reflects a tension between the centripetal pull of the personal pronoun "I," and the centrifugal attraction of others, events, history. Leiris, one of the most self-absorbed writers of any age in any language, is not solipsistic. Since his existence is not circumscribed as a fiction but is openly played out through social processes of language and writing, he endlessly confronts what is beyond himself.

Leiris continues to travel, to write on African art, on Ethiopian possession cults, on culture contacts, on the politics of folklore and ethnography. After World War II he emerges from the solitary card-game of *Biffures* to serve on an official commission for the reform of labor policy in colonial West Africa. He travels to the French Antilles and Haiti where, with Alfred Métraux, he studies Voodoo and culture contacts. He becomes a friend of Aimé Césaire and a publicist for the emergent Negritude movement. He serves on the editorial committee of *Les Temps Modernes*, writes for *Présence Africaine*, for UNESCO on racism and the diversity of cultures. In a new preface to *L'Afrique fantôme* (1951), a book judged subversive by the Vichy authorities and burned, he situates his former field journal within a complex of colonial attitudes, highlighting its excessive estheticism and radical-chic posturing. During the same year, 1950, he composes "L'Ethnographe devant le colonialisme," a lucid discussion of a social science inextricably involved in imperial power inequalities. *La Règle du jeu* begins to reflect these historical, "external" pulls. In Volume 2, *Fourbis*, Leiris melds the exploration of childhood memories that had dominated *Biffures* with recent travels and political commitments, probing the (irreconcilable?) conflict between his need for gratuitous poetic experience and the demands of political work. Volume 3, *Fibrilles*, turns on both the public experience of a trip to Communist China in 1955 and the private crisis of an attempted suicide.

Leiris's close involvement with the art world continues. He writes texts on Giacometti, Miró, Masson, Picasso, Duchamp, Wifredo Lam, and Francis Bacon. He also contributes essays on the work of Michel Butor, Queneau, Sartre, Roussel, Lévi-Strauss, Eluard, Alfred Métraux, Bataille, Césaire—nearly all of these texts emerging from personal relationships. (His oeuvre can be seen as a loose web of interpersonal ties.) Leiris attends the Havana Cultural Congress of 1968 and participates in the May rebellions of that year as well as in demonstrations supporting the rights

of immigrant workers.[16] He continues his work at the Musée de l'Homme in a research and curatorial post in the "Department d'Afrique Noire." His daily routine is established: mornings of literary work at his home, Quai des Grands Augustins, afternoons of ethnology in his basement office at the Museum. He comes to regard this oscillation as emblematic of his life.

The relation of self-portraiture and ethnography, two poles of his writing, is crucial for Leiris. One activity looks inward, the other outward; one begins with the self, the other with different people. He keeps them apart, as distinct work-spaces, for if they become too close an effect of alternation and questioning is lost. (An oeuvre can be seen as a form of travel.) But the two activities are part of a common project. While Leiris's pursuit of an individual "savoir vivre" cannot exclude politics and history, conversely his ethnography, directly focussed on others, provides models or allegories for his personal identity. What is at stake in both domains is an elusive conception of "authenticity."

In some ideal circumstance both self and culture would be meaningful, present, and truthful without hypocrisy or constraint. Leiris always yearns for this condition. But he encounters mediation, rules, play-acting, and evasion everywhere, both in his own life and in the life of social groups. A vision of Africa, in the twenties, had seemed to promise real immediacy, spontaneous emotion and contact. But Leiris is disillusioned by his encounter with the realities of travel, colonialism, and abstract social science as well as by his discovery of duplicity among Africans, even those apparently "lost" in trance. His response is complex. It embraces artifice in order to transcend it.

Like Roussel, Queneau or Duchamp he is attracted to the idea that adherence to specific rules is the only route to novelty of expression (spontaneity and genius being romantic myths). Moreover, this attitude resonates with Bataille's principle of eroticism, that "fulfillment" presupposes lack, or violence, and that "freedom" is always dependent on the very constraints it violates (a principle confirmed, at a cultural level, by Mauss who commented in his lectures that taboos existed to be transgressed).[17] Embracing the "rule of the game," Leiris does not, however, give up the search for a reality or presence beyond artifice. He is stubbornly, romantically devoted to a goal of immediacy, spontaneity, and "poetry." He never goes over to irony, semiotics, or rhetoric, though he feels their claims intimately. He persists in a "naive" search for authenticity, but an authenticity always *vitiated* by equivocation, imperfect expression, ethical qualms. But this is the paradoxical source of a certain power, and even beauty. As Philippe Lejeune puts it, the attraction of Leiris's writing is "the extraordinary energy of a desire that, however thwarted it might be, does not renounce expression, but sees itself forced to always flee in advance, where discourse, at the same time prudent and daring, is exasperated by being able to touch the truth only lightly."[18]

In this permanently "exasperated" access to the real, Leiris appeals to erotic fetishism, "myth," and the discipline of the stage. The fetish is the luminous, charged object or moment, cut out of its "whole" context. (In fact it *produces* the effect of a wholeness.) It is an exterior, objectified crystallization of desire, something distant *and* miraculously close, erasing the gulf between inner and outer experience. The sense of erotic plenitude produced by fixation on the fetish is not, however, narrowly limited to sexual experiences; it gives a sense of intense reality to the commonest perceptions and encounters. For Leiris, Giacometti's sculpture powerfully embodies this charged presence. And in his recent sequel to *La Règle du jeu, Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia* (The Ribbon around Olympia's Neck), Leiris probes the expressive power of fetishism in many domains of writing and experience.

In a related fashion, Leiris uses the word myth to denote an access to the real that is not rational or representational, but evocative and performative. Among the sources for this understanding are the mythic inventions of André Masson, the ethnographic lectures of Maurice Leenhardt on Melanesian "lived myth," the *nouveau roman*, particularly the writing of Michel Butor, and his own research on possession cults in Ethiopia.[19] The Ethiopian research is particularly revealing. In *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris is disturbed by the apparent insincerity of many of the possessions he observes. People go in and out of trance as if on cue, and they "use" their repertoire of spirits (zâr genies) for crass, personal gain—including economic exploitation of the ethnographer. Yet the psychic power of the zârs is undeniable. In the Paris twenties Leiris thinks of trance (like jazz) as a privileged form of abandonment and loss of self, a direct access to non-rational and emotional powers. But in Africa everything seems contrived and impure. He cannot know when anyone, including himself, is being really "sincere." Thus in 1933 *L'Afrique fantôme* ends with disillusionment. It is not until the mid-1950s that Leiris makes his peace with the ambiguous experience, in a monograph, *La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar*. Here the presence of mythic powers is analyzed as "theatrical," an intense "lived theatre" where artifice is a means for controlling, and thus becoming, the role. The reality of trance is always to some degree staged, but its deceptions—like the "art" of a great actor—produce an undeniable presence, a reality finally transcending art.

Between 1933 in Ethiopia and the publication of his book on spirit possession in 1958, Leiris's research interests had shifted from Africa to the Caribbean. Doubtless the latter context—where all identities are hybrid and impure, where there are no unspliced cultural roots, and where peoples have historically had to "make themselves up"—helped open the ethnographer to a theatrical conception of authenticity. One sees his shift of emphasis, for example, in a recent conversation with Michael Hagger-

ty on Jazz (in Section 5, below). Leiris is drawn to Jazz less as a source of transcendence and pure emotionality (what it had been for him in the twenties) and more as an example of cultural impurity and creative syncretism. And here we see an important way that his ethnographic and personal research activites finally coincide. For what Leiris pursues in *La Règle du jeu*, a personal identity endlessly worked out, textually and rhetorically "played," is mirrored and confirmed by an open-ended view of culture as improvised, spliced, historically acted.[20]

KNOCK-OUT ou K.O. – (autrement dit: "chaos")

But for Leiris all such performances are at best a *modus vivendi*. They merely cover up a deep, ineradicable fault. And if in his later writings he seems to achieve a troubled tranquility, the achievement occurs under a general sign of failure:

> And so, a lot of noise for nothing. I've sweated blood and spat fire to end up, in my daily practice, as another of those bourgeois who think themselves progressive, an anthologized author who will perhaps be praised for his attempt at sincerity and exactitude of expression, and even for his ingenious connections and interweavings, in the absence of that special something which (for some) flashes in the slightest phrase, and which I believe to be the essence.[21]

The "special something" is an inspired, visionary poetry. Leiris never stops lamenting its absence. Indeed he finds that his only truly poetic gesture – a willingness to go all the way – is his attempted suicide. Otherwise he proceeds without "inspiration," shuffling and writing over his documentary note-cards, laboring to give form to the traces of a passing reality. As Denis Hollier finely observes, his turn to autobiographical prose after 1930 marks an abandonment of imagination, both surrealist and romantic, in favor of a "parti pris de réalisme." His oeuvre is a cenotaph, the tomb of an impossible poetry, a silent oracle.[22] But in mourning his lack of inspiration, Leiris produces another kind of poetry, and like his friend Edmond Jabès, he finds himself writing a book whose words must endlessly paper over a void. Wholeness is denied to the real: a poetry of visionary imagination is replaced with a poetic prose severely ruled by games of language, history, and personality. This prose can only – and it is not nothing – turn or trope what is given by the real: the evidence of events, thoughts, dreams, words.

Words swerve. Leiris is a longtime fan of Fred Astaire, whom he once evoked as a kind of stylish automaton able, for a frantic moment, to be breathtakingly *present*, a dandy whose vestimentary elegance had

something tawdry, even corrupt about it. This "frivolity"—a costumed dance or excessive dressing in the face of malaise—defines what may still be possible in the domain of artistic "creation." For there is something splendidly frivolous about Leiris's latest book, *Langage tangage* . . . where it seems as if an old, punctiliously attired man has asked his intimate partner, language, to take just a few more turns around the floor, breaking suddenly into an awkward jitterbug or tango.

But a more poignant image of Leiris's career may be found in his recollection—ending the present collection—of a minor character from Aimé Césaire's play *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe.* The ambassador Franco de Medina walks on stage, stutters some words, and is led away to his execution. His failure is complete. But in the performance described by Leiris, a skilled actor unexpectedly gives life to this pathetic role and for a moment, with a few burlesqued gestures, creates a real person.

TOTAL: le totem de tantale

The texts that follow are grouped thematically in six sections. While there is a very general progression from early to late writings, chronology is often violated. For example, the last-written passage, from *Langage tangage,* occurs in the first cluster. Leiris returns again and again to certain problems, and the sequence of selections below tries to show his oeuvre as a field of repetitions, juxtapositions, and variations. There are frequent shifts of voice: Leiris in different tones, interventions by friends and translators—an oeuvre aerated by others.

Leiris's "sentences" are peculiar objects. They often proclaim their artificial status and regularly transgress the taboo, learned by every schoolchild, against "run on sentences." One senses a certain hostility and fascination for syntax. The well-formed utterance, always a drastic selection of linguistic possibilities, is made to seem awkward, to stagger under excessive demands of meaning, allusion or qualification. Leiris's most complex constructions show a baroque process of thought, association, and analysis occurring *in writing.* He is suspicious of summary, peremptory expressions, preferring elaborate, careful, self-limiting performances. But there is also a subversion in this "precision" which frequently borders on belaborment and in extreme cases flirts with glossolalic overload. There can be no question, then, of breaking up Leiris's sentences for clarity of translation. As a matter of policy they have not been simplified, even though the transfer from French to English syntax may bring, inevitably, even more awkwardness.

Headings within sections are mine. Each piece's original title, or lack of title, can be determined from the reference immediately following it.

Leiris often uses ellipses and parentheses. Brackets are reserved for editorial cuts or clarifications.

NOTES

1. *Magazine Littéraire*, July 1985, p. 104.
2. Michel Leiris, "Conception et réalité chez Raymond Roussel," in R. Roussel, *Épaves* (Paris: 1972) p. 9.
3. See Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (New York: 1965) pp. 112–114.
4. See James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1981) pp. 548–553; also Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible *Documents*," *Brisées* (Paris: 1966) pp. 256–266.
5. On *L'Afrique fantôme* see James Clifford, "Interrupting the Whole," *Conjunctions 6* (1984) pp. 282–295.
6. *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris: 1951) p. 324. (See excerpt in Section 2 below).
7. J.-B. Pontalis, "Michel Leiris ou la psychanalyse interminable," *Les Temps Modernes*, December 1955, pp. 925–933.
8. Leiris, "Préface" to Raymond Queneau, *Contes et propos* (Paris: 1981) pp. 6–7.
9. See Denis Hollier, ed. *Le Collège de sociologie (1937–1939)* (Paris: 1979); Jean Jamin, "Un sacré collège ou les apprentis sorciers de la sociologie," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, 68 (1980) pp. 5–30; Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," pp. 560–561.
10. Elizabeth Wing is translating the Hollier volume in which the text appears (pp. 60–74) for the University of Minnesota Press (1986 or 87).
11. Hollier, *Collège*, p. 60.
12. Leiris, "Propos recueillis par Madeleine Chapsal, 1966," in Pierre Chappuis ed., *Michel Leiris* (Seghers Poètes d'aujourdhui, Paris: 1973) p. 116.
13. Leiris, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal, 1961," *Ibid.* pp. 112–113.
14. There are affinities with the science of the singular sketched out by Carlo Ginzburg in "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 (1980) pp. 5–36.
15. "Oneirography," and the affinity of descriptive rhetoric with that of the vision and the dream are discussed by Michel Beaujour in "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981) pp. 27–59.
16. Jean-Pierre Faye, "Leiris and Militancy," in *Sub-Stance* 11–12 (1975) pp. 65–71. (This special issue on Leiris, edited by Jean-Jacques Thomas, is the fullest critical introduction to Leiris in English.)
17. Alfred Métraux, "Rencontre avec les ethnologues," *Critique* 195–196 (1963) p. 683.

18. Philippe Lejeune, "Glossaire," *Sub-Stance* 11-12 (1975) p. 127. See his *Lire Leiris* (Paris: 1975).

19. André Masson, "The Unbridled Line," in André Masson, *Drawings* (London: Thames and Hudson, no pagination); James Clifford, *Person and Myth: Maurice Leenhardt in the Melanesian World* (Berkeley: 1982); Leiris, "Le Réalisme mythologique de Michel Butor," *Brisées* (Paris: 1966) pp. 215–238: ". . . the entire story is situated on the mythic plane, without ever betraying what I'm tempted to call its *vérisme* (truth effect) so close are we to the ground." (p. 236, on Butor's *La Modification*).

20. See especially, Leiris, "Folklore et culture vivante," in Robert Jaulin ed., *Le Livre blanc de l'ethnocide en Amérique* (Paris: 1973).

21. Leiris, *Frêle bruit* (Paris: 1976) pp. 287–288.

22. Quoted from *Manhood* by Denis Hollier, "La Poésie jusqu'à z," in *L'Ire des vents*, special issue on Leiris, Spring 1981, pp. 141–159.

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1925 *Simulacre* (with lithographs by André Masson). Paris: Galerie Simon.

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1934 *L'Afrique fantôme.* Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1951, 1968, 1983)

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1943 *Haut mal.* Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1969)

1945 *Nuits sans nuit.* Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted and expanded, 1961)

1946 *Aurora.* Paris: Gallimard. (Reprinted 1978)

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1948 *Biffures. La Règle du jeu. I.* Paris: Gallimard.

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1967 *Afrique noire: la Création plastique* (with Jacqueline Delange). Paris: Gallimard.

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1970 *Wifredo Lam.* Milan: Fratelli Fabbri.

1971 *André Masson, massacres et autres dessins.* Paris: Hermann.

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1981 *Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia.* Paris: Gallimard.

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1951 *Race and Culture.* Paris: UNESCO.

1953 "The African Negroes and the Arts of Carving and Sculpture," in *Interrelations of Cultures,* Paris: UNESCO. (Reprinted 1971, Westport, Conn.: UNESCO)

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MICHEL LEIRIS

NEW TRANSLATIONS

by

Lydia Davis, James Clifford, Richard Sieburth
With additional materials by
Paul Auster and Michael Haggerty

Edited by

James Clifford

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SECTION 1 TROPICS

PAINTING/WRITING

Around 1920, through the intercession of Max Jacob, Leiris became friends with Joan Miró and André Masson. The two had just moved into adjoining studios on the rue Blomet in Montparnasse. Leiris frequented their gatherings where he encountered, among others, the writer Robert Desnos and the painters Picasso, Dubuffet, and Gris. Miró recalls the ambiance: "More than anything else, the rue Blomet was friendship, an exalted exchange and discovery of ideas among a marvelous group of friends. Among those who came to the gatherings at Masson's studio were Michel Leiris, who has remained my closest friend, and Roland Tual, Georges Limbour, and Armand Salacrou. We talked, we drank a lot. Those were the days of brandy and water, of curaçao tangerines. The others generally came by metro, by the famous Nord-Sud that served as the link between the Montmartre of the Surrealists and the Montparnasse of the backward artists."

1. JOAN MIRÓ: LETTER TO MICHEL LEIRIS AUGUST 10, 1924

Tr. by Paul Auster

Montroig

My dear Michel,

I have been wanting to write to you for a long time but haven't found a moment until now.

I am working furiously; you and all my other writer friends have given me much help and improved my understanding of many things. I think about our conversation, when you told me how you started with a word and watched to see where it would take you. I have done a series of small things on wood, in which I take off from some form in the wood. Using

an artificial thing as a point of departure like this, I feel, is parallel to what writers can obtain by starting with an arbitrary sound; the R.R. from the song of a cricket for example or the isolated sound of a consonant or vowel, any sound, be it nasal or labial. This can create a surprising metaphysical state in you poets, even when you use the sound of vowels or consonants that have no meaning at all.

In leafing through my notebook I have also noticed the extremely disturbing quality of the dissociated drawings I sometimes do – meant for canvasses I am preparing and on which I jot down a number of remarks: names of colors or simply the monosyllable *yes* when I feel that an idea should be carried out. I intend to do all these drawings. In other drawings, of objects that fly around on a flat surface, I write isolated letters. I agree with Breton that there is something extremely disturbing about a page of writing.

More or less total destruction of everything I left behind last summer and which (I) thought I would pick up again. Still too real! I am moving away from all pictorial conventions (that poison). In spreading out my canvasses, I have noticed that the ones that have been painted touch the spirit less directly than the ones that are simply drawn (or that use a minimum of color); however stripped of pictorial meaning, the intromission of exciting materials (colors) *shakes up* your blood and the exalted sensation that *claws at* the soul is ruined. You already know the pictorial process. 1. Pure line. 2. Pure colors. 3. Nuances, the charm and music of colors. Final stage of degeneration.

There is no doubt that my canvasses that are simply drawn, with a few dots of color, a rainbow, are more profoundly moving. These move us in the elevated sense of the word, like the tears of a child in its cradle. The others are like the screams of a whore in love.

My latest canvasses are conceived like a bolt from the blue, absolutely detached from the outer world (from the world of men who have two eyes in the space below their forehead).

Figuration of one of my latest *x*'s (I can't find the word for it here; don't want to say either canvas or painting). Portrait of a charming lady friend from Paris – I begin with the idea of touching her body *very chastely*, beginning with her side and going up to her head. Profile drawn in charcoal. A vertical line for the breasts; one is a pear that opens and scatters its little seeds (those wonderful little hearts of a fruit). On the other side an apple being pecked at by a bird. Sparks fly out of the wound caused by this pecking. Below, going across the sex (I insist on my very chaste

and respectful intentions) a comet with its luminous tail; blonde hair; one hand holds a flower with a butterfly circling around it; the other hand is trying to take hold of an egg that is turning, a luminous circle around it. —In the upper corner of the canvas are stars.

This is hardly painting, but I don't give a damn.

Are you working? Tell me what you are doing and don't forget to write to me. —I owe a lot to all of you, and a word from you would make me extremely happy.

I am not forgetting the issue of *Valori Plastici* devoted to G. de Chirico; I will order it when I return. I spent my last days in Paris more or less broke.

Good health and good work. Cordial handshakes from

Joan.

My dear Odette, André, and Lili—to all of you I send my best as well.
Yours,
Joan.

Miró's detailed reminiscence of the Rue Blomet and other letters to Leiris are translated by Paul Auster and included in *Selected Writings of Joan Miró* edited by Margit Rowell, copyright © 1986 by Margit Rowell, in the Documents of Twentieth Century Art series published by G.K. Hall and Company. Grateful acknowledgement is made to the publisher and to Margit Rowell for permission to quote from these texts in advance of publication.

2. JOAN MIRÓ

Tr. by Lydia Davis

[. . .] If, however, the bedroom of the Queen of Prussia consists of no more than a floor and some bare walls, the reason for this is very simple: the furniture has dissolved in water, the way my table does sometimes, when I'm tired and my books and cigarettes turned out to be incapable of beguiling my boredom. (At these times I leave my house, I walk through

the streets, my eyes wide, trying to adopt towards my surroundings the attitude of a child filled with wonder, which is Miró's attitude. All these organisms have set out from their points of origin and flow by, pools of brilliant colors, yet enclosed within clearly delimited contours: here I am back at Miró's pictures. I blow my nose; and for the second time that nasal trumpet takes me back to Miró's pictures. I quicken my step, I look at a shop window in which some superb ties are bursting into flame; and for the third time . . .). Miró has been the one to express this liquefaction, this relentless evaporation of structures—as relentless as any of the other vicious circles in which I, and all of creation, turn round and round—, this soft leakage of the substance that makes all things—us, our thoughts, and the setting we live in—like jellyfish or octopi, he has been the one to express this very adequately in several of his old canvases and especially in his current series of *Portraits*. As beautiful as sarcastic laughter or graffiti showing human architecture in its particularly grotesque and horrible aspect, each of these works is an ironic pebble sending out vicious, circular ripples when cast into the swamp of understanding, where for so many years, already, so many traps and nets have been mouldering.[. . .]

From "Joan Miró," *Documents* 1929; *Brisées* pp. 35–36.

3. THE UNBRIDLED LINE (ANDRÉ MASSON)

Tr. by J. Clifford

Voluble lines, fusing, curving, breaking, fading, starting up.
Lines inflected like voices liturgically chanting a mythic or legendary text.
Melodious lines—as is fit from the hand of a music lover—a hand that
wings (qui *s'aille*) in André Breton's term, releasing flight by means of a syllable.
Lines exploring and learning, but teaching nothing. Always lyrical, never didactic.

Line more than stroke.

Drawing more than drawn.

Lineage, perhaps, more than line.

For the enveloping line, holding in by lateral pressure what it confines, Masson substitutes the soaring line that feels only one pressure, that which fires it and, without slackening, propels it throughout its trajectory.

Line in motion, rather than line striving to define a structure. No transcription (by a single stroke or by the successive approximations of several strokes more-or-less superimposed), no transcription of a reality (or a part of the reality we commonly experience), but a provoking – on the spot – a spurting out of something unquestionably real.

From "The Unbridled Line," preface to André Masson, *Massacres et autres dessins*, Paris: Hermann, 1971.

GLOSSARY: MY GLOSSES' OSSUARY

Tr. by Lydia Davis

A monstrous aberration causes people to believe that language came into being to facilitate their relations with one another. It is with this end in mind, of usefulness, that they make dictionaries in which words are catalogued and given a well defined meaning (they believe), based on usage and etymology. Now, etymology is a perfectly ineffectual science that is not at all informative about the *true* meaning of a word, that is, the particular, personal signification which each individual ought to assign to it, as his mind pleases. As for usage, it is superfluous to say that it is the lowest criterion to which one could refer.

The everday meaning and the etymological meaning of a word can teach us nothing about ourselves, since they represent the collective part of language, which was made for all people and not for each of us individually.

By dissecting the words we like, without bothering about conforming either to their etymologies or to their accepted significations, we discover their most hidden qualities and the secret ramifications that are propagated through the whole language, channeled by associations of sounds, forms and ideas. Then language changes into an oracle and there we have a thread (however slender it may be) to guide us through the Babel of our minds.

From "Glossaire: j'y serre mes gloses," in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 1925; *Brisées*, p. 11.

Pour le texte original © Mercure de France 1966.

fuseau — tresse le réseau des lois physiques, soit en faisceau, soit en fusées.
futilité — fuite légère, flûtée.
futur — solfatare des turbines à l'affût. Déconfiture fatale des rues et des hures.

G

galères — la terre est égale à leur gale.
géant — étrange, grand, et étranger.
gel — il loge des gemmes qui nous enjôlent.
génération (engendre gêne, et ration.)
génie — naît de la neige, son nid.
genoux — engrenages ou verrous : les nœuds du gynécée.
girasol — agile col de girafe, il s'érige haut !

GIRASOL

givre — fifre aigu de l'hiver rigide.
glace — mirage qui craque. Il nous enlace.
glèbe — le socle des gueux et du blé.
gorge (les deux G se recourbent et figurent deux seins ; l'OR du centre est leur gouge.)
grâce — garce grêle.
grammaire — la mère-grand.
gravité (t'y graver...)
grenade — un dard s'y engrène : ses grains ardent.
grimace — masque maigre pour face aigrie.
grimoire — moire grise, obscure, rimant au rire de mort.
gris — couleur de grille.
guérir, gai rire...
guerre (je ne l'aime guère...)
gui — fruit druidique à goût de givre. Gorge de guivre.

Page de *Glossaire, j'y serre mes gloses,*
avec vignette d'André Masson.

Le sceptre miroitant.

From "Glossaire," in **Mots sans Memoirs,** 1969, p. 111.

METAPHOR

Tr. by Lydia Davis

"*Metaphor* (from the Greek *metaphora*, transfer) is a figure by which the mind applies the name of one object to another object, because of a shared characteristic that allows them to be put side by side and compared." (Darmestater.) And yet, it is hard to know where metaphor begins and where it ends. An abstract word is formed by the sublimation of a concrete word. A concrete word, which never designates an object by more than one of its qualities, is itself hardly more than a metaphor, or at the very least a figurative expression. Moreover, to designate an object by an expression that corresponds to it, not figuratively but literally, one would need to know the very essence of that object, which is impossible, since we can only know phenomena, not things in themselves.

Not only language, but the whole of intellectual life is based on a play of transpositions, of symbols, which can be described as metaphorical. Then again, knowlege always proceeds by comparison, so that all known objects are connected to one another by relations of interdependency. With any two of them, it is impossible to determine which is designated by the name proper to it and is not a metaphor of the other, and vice versa. A man is a moving tree, just as much as a tree is a rooted man. In the same way the sky is a rarefied earth, the earth a denser sky. And if I see a dog running, it is just as much *the run that is dogging.*

. . . Even this article is metaphorical.

From *Documents*, 1929; *Brisées*, p. 25.

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PHANTOM AFRICA (SANGA)

Tr. by J. Clifford

A member of the Mission Dakar-Djibouti *— the trans-African ethnographic expedition of 1931–33 organized by Marcel Griaule — Leiris embarks on intensive research into the secret, initiatory language of the mask society of the Dogon of Sanga, French Sudan (Mali). The expedition, composed of a team of European researchers, will remain in Sanga for seven weeks*

initiating a long tradition of ethnographic study of the Dogon by Griaule and his students. Leiris's journal of the expedition was published without emendations in 1934 as L'Afrique fantôme. *Its "excessive" subjectivism, and its frankness about the* Mission's *questionable manner of acquiring museum artifacts, would open a rift between Leiris and Griaule. In the excerpts that follow Leiris records a few of the less edifying aspects of fieldwork, as well as some lessons learned about translation and meaning from intensive research with an initiated old man, work that would result in a scholarly monograph (*La langue secrète des Dogon de Sanga*) and that rhymed with his lifelong concern for puns, experimental writing and special languages.*

10 October

Hard to sleep, for the others as for me, since we're possessed by the work. All night, dreams of totemic complications and family structures, with no way to save myself from this labyrinth of streets, tabooed sites and cliffs. Horror at becoming so inhuman . . . But how shake it off, get back in contact? Would have to leave, forget everything.

Sudden appearance of an explanation for Ambara's discomfort the other day at having me carry some material to his wife for sewing instead of taking it himself: Lutten [a member of the research team] informs me that women never sew in this country. Sewing is men's work. The whimsical Ambara is so lazy he can't even sew . . . By sending me, he probably wanted to avoid shocking his father-in-law with his laziness.

11 October

The old man [Ambibè Babadyi] who for the last two days has been teaching me the mysteries of the mask society comes up with an astonishing text in the secret language—the second time since yesterday. I record the text, I read it aloud with intonations and the old man, delighted, stands up, claps and cries *"Pay! Pay!"* (Good! Good!) But when it comes to translation everything comes apart. The secret language is a language of formulas, composed of enigmas, strings of nonsense, puns (?), cascades of phonemes, and intermixed symbols. The old man, who thinks I really want to be initiated, applies his usual principles of teaching. Each time I ask for the translation of a word or isolated section of a sentence he loses the thread and has to repeat his whole text from beginning to end, becoming entangled, naturally, and giving me a different version each time. Playing to

the hilt his role of teacher, he gets mad every time I interrupt and shouts "*Makou!*" (Silence!) Then, since it's market day, he's had enough and wants to go stroll around. I instruct him to stay. But the translation is still a mess. From fatigue and enervation and lacking, also, the ability to effectively swear at the old man—whom I don't want to offend and who moreover is a nice guy—I'm on the brink of tears, for a reverse reaction has occurred: my irritation has been replaced by a childish letting go. The old native lieutenant Douso Wologane (assigned to us by the administrator as interpreter), surprised at my collapse, speaks gently to the old man and brings him around. For better or worse, I finish the translation.

This morning Griaule with his riding crop chased away a Bambara merchant who wanted to take food from one of our little informants (who was eating with us) threatening to strike him. Abara—the kid's name—clearly has no luck: the other day while he was working with us a sheep belonging to his family ate the cream of millet prepared for his meal.

They bring us a scrap of cardboard from the market, crudely cut up, and without the slightest inscription. It's a receipt given by the official market superintendent to vendors for the tax levied by the administration on tradesmen. Some supervision! Around here the highwaymen don't hide in the caves where the masks are kept . . .

[. . .] 26 October

Striking example of the sort of maddening misunderstandings that periodically arise when the inquiry turns to translation. Wanting to make it clear to Ambibè Babadyi that I must have literal translations of the texts he gives me, not approximate ones, I pick up a handful of pebbles. One by one I line up the pebbles on the table saying of each: "Here is that word, that word, that word." Then I take another bunch of pebbles and one by one replace the line of pebbles with new pebbles saying: "Here is the French word for that word, the French word for that word . . .", asking him to explain what the phrase in question meant as if it were a matter—assuming this were possible—of replacing each word of the sentence of secret language with a corresponding Dogon word (which the translator would transmit to me in French), just as I had done with the pebbles. Ambibè Babadyi picks up the first pebble—corresponding to the word *man*—and I think he has understood. But he takes a second pebble and places it nearby saying it is a *Peul woman*. Then he traces a line on the table with his finger, takes the first pebble and moves it along this imaginary line, explaining that the *man* is walking along the road. My entire lovely plan collapses: once again Ambibè has mixed up the word and the thing, the sign and the thing signified. Instead of treating the pebble as if it were a word

designating *the man* he has taken it as the man himself and has used it to describe his material movements. The concrete example I had used hoping to make him understand better has succeeded only in muddying everything, and at the same time making crystal clear a double stupidity: Ambibè's inability to form a clear notion of language as such; and my own ability to treat the words of a sentence as if they were separate entities.

Learned by the way that the famous red sign announcing the *sigui* (which is to say, that the time of celebrations for the great initiation has come) is nothing other than a "growing thing" in a location – close to the village of Yougo – watched over by a man who is the only one permitted to go there. I think of the Sibylline priests, of vegetation cults . . .

In the evening from the top of the platform of the dead hunter, Ambibè Babadyi – with stick raised, blanket draped over a shoulder, bare head, looking very patriarchal – intones a discourse in the secret language, while below the *ya siguinè* ["sister of the masks," lone female in the masquerades] is dancing, dragging herself on her knees uttering the mocking laugh of the masks, amid more or less general indifference.

[. . .] 14 November

Another noctural emission. Dreamed moreover that I was reconciled with André Breton. To hell with psychoanalysis: I'm not going to try to discover some momentary connection between these two events. I'd rather Freud told me what incest, solar or otherwise, gave birth to these masks, masks discovered by a woman, and whose present "sister" – the *ya siguinè* – is a woman surrounded by a major cult, masks tabooed for women in general as being especially murky and dangerous . . .

Outside of this, the abductions [of ethnographic specimens] and tips from informants continue. The sanctuaries and caves where they stash old masks are systematically searched.

The regional chief and all the people mobilized for the Armistice Day celebration return from Bandiagara. While it wasn't a major mobilization, involving just a parade, the number of horses and men is large. And still the administration says *we're* making too free with the country! The journey to Bandiagara emptied the area of a large portion of its male population, and this just at the end of the harvest, the time for garnering wheat . . .

Bad feelings about France; indifference for Africa; bad feelings about this journal, verbose when it should be pointed, lean.

15 November

Yesterday our friends Apama and Ambara secretly brought in the fiber costumes for the masks we had asked them for. They begged us (above all!) to hide them well. Today with their help I fill out the labels for these objects. Apama and Ambara listen for the slightest noise. A child who wants to enter gets scolded.

No doubt about it: learning from our techniques the two fine fellows have gotten the fiber costumes from their hiding place in the cave of the masks. Influence of the European . . .

My depression continues and sometimes I want to smash everything, or go back to Paris. But what to do in Paris?

16 November

Two days before we leave Sanga: sound recordings, last photos, pulling things together, filling in gaps, corrections, etc.

The "little" brother of Apama, who brings in the mask called "multi-storied house," hadn't wished to sell it, since he got it from his older brother, the hunter who died on October 20th. Today he agrees to sell, but on condition that we ourselves go and abduct the object so he can say that he was forced. . . . Following our example, everyone makes peace with their god and gives in to pious lying.*

Embarking for Africa, I had hoped to find some pluck at last! I'm over thirty, getting old, and still this intellectualism . . . Will I ever recover any freshness?

From *L'Afrique fantôme*, 1934, pp. 109–110.

*We decided later that we had been the ones duped in this affair. When we went to the rocky hole where the proffered *siriguè* was hidden, we saw it was old and mostly faded while the one we were familiar with was bright and new. Apama and Ambara continued to maintain it was the same object. But they probably wanted to deflect our attention onto a used *siriguè* for fear we would discover the new one.

WORDS/SWERVES

Tr. by J. Clifford

From the African words I did my best to record phonetically in 1931 in colonial Mali, then called "French Sudan," and which my native interpreter had converted right away into his normal tongue and then translated into mine when as an apprentice ethnologist I collected texts in *sigi so* or the secret language of the now far too famous Dogon of Sanga, from these words, each one an enigma to me, to the words, practically all French, that as a surrealist I had already taken as a basis for that GLOSSAIRE J'Y SERRE MES GLOSES that hasn't stopped growing since then, expanding because the words that specially moved me—the first ones I treated this way—were joined by more and more words of lesser attraction but whose analysis has allowed me to express certain ideas or whose presence has given more of a "dictionary" tone to this recently revived work, without mentioning the vocables that (then as before) could lend themselves to a punning style of imaginative play or to some other construction emerging from their material aspect, the distance is certainly great. Nonetheless these words are similar in the way they have come to me laden with a more or less appreciable dose of mystery, either as something entirely strange while still haloed with a sort of nimbus from ritual use, or else as words from my own or a neighboring tongue that incite, for reasons not always clear, an activity that if it is not an elucidation is at least that transposition into the speech of the Other which serves as a positive "open sesame" to a person seeking poetry.

If—a plan long too unplanned for its sense to be obvious but which became a bit clearer under the mounting pressure of that so very shameless sovereign, time, and which as my life seemed more sensibly to be shrinking I saw as the motor of what for quite a few years has been my chief occupation—I write, transcending direct speech and hoping that by passionately giving form to, and thus perhaps buying off the pain that preys less on my brain than on my gut (a knowledge, for example—elementary alarm venomously alimenting almost animal ruminations—that we will each in our turn irreversibly pass, my friends and I, like so many loved ones, from presence to absence, consciousness to unconsciousness), perhaps it's in my word-games, procedures apparently not very serious, that I'm most likely to succeed. Out of what language, in effect, do these scraps emerge, if not one more connected than any other to what I want to conjure, since it's a sort of language of death: a scrambled language tied to the traditional *upside down world* popular imagery makes into a theme of burlesqued, comic-book-style illustrations and that—a black turn of mind I'd like to be able to conquer—appears to me (much like,

for example, the hubbub of moving house or the brouhaha of a train station during the vacation exodus) as a caricatured figure of the absurd head-over-heels situation where death, if there were an afterlife, would not fail to dump us; a language something like the initiatory languages found in societies that put great emphasis on ceremonies insuring the replacement of a declining generation by an ascending one (societies we don't know how to designate since we can no longer call them "inferior," "primitive," or "archaic"), not a common parlance or even a noble speech but a language of the other side, of that other side which is more than irrational to someone who doesn't believe in a second life that's measurable or locatable in any way. Loosing logical collars and with this break giving me a notion of the strictly unimaginable nothingness beyond the grave, this idiom, as far from common talk as the sacred is from the profane, a disjointed, dislocated, danced rather than devoutly dressed-up discourse, helps me feel less wholly disoriented before that NOTHING (neither gap, gulf, nor abyss, but nothing, absolutely nothing, and not even the word's echo), less disarmed confronting that unknown which, since one can fictively have words with it, ceases to be mere negativity and becomes something instead of a God-knows-what always out of reach, with the result that—at least while I'm working—the horror of future annihilation, still noxious but now more diffused, is drawn out of its diabolically imperceptible nullity thanks to the illusion of a bridge linguistically suspended.

> /Native perhaps to a naive reality: if I speak—or write—a language of death then death is no more death (not the end of everything but a far-off land I frequent in some small way through a verbal exoticism) and I conclude that I'm not merely killing time but really dodging death when I play my game of hide-and-seek with words simultaneously disguised and discovered, to be finally sharpened and scoured having dawdled, many of them, through multiple mixings, modulations and meanders./

Neither a jargon for aggressive auguries bragging how well they argue, nor an *argot* for folks in the same orbit conversing, gloves off, in gross vulgarity or in street-talk good for saying "fuck off," the language spoken by the glosses served squeezed in my *Glossary* belongs to one no more than to the other of these categories: it veers from the norm only in that it's chopped and divided as if—supposedly passing as imitation dictionary definitions—the statements I delighted in were like fisticuffs or rockets shot off in capriciously segmented paths, statements free of any too-oppressively articulated syntax and drawing increased power of impregnation from this absence leaving the words, as it were, stripped. Entice, entertain, and—if only an instant—reign, isn't this what comes first to the brain of an artist or writer, even more to a poet in pain perhaps but not showing it aiming without shame to be a shaman?

Beginning with words, making them in some sense think for me (dic-

tate me rather than be my diction): I like to think of this as the condition of a speech that would not discourse (subjecting words to a story, whether derived from a line of reasoning or from the hybrid products of automatic writing) and which would instead impress itself on our hearing in more mordant terms undulled by any role as intermediaries and undiluted by belonging to more or less loquacious sentences.

To flee overly linear continuity or shatter it even before it starts: from this I derive both my pleasure at setting up, with a few words, pseudo definitions and my taste – which I know people of taste find excessive – for incidental clauses and insertions betwen parentheses or dashes, a taste in itself tied not only to my need, forever fearful of the *faux pas*, to correct or specify (as I insist on expressing myself in a circumstantial way that avoids all soporific monotony even in the area of punctuation), but a taste tied also to my desire to slice up sentences, syncopate and parcel them out, another tactic for dodging any droning and a zig-zag style I like to compare (snobbism again?) with that of jazz singers thrown into the voluble cascades of scat who seem, with their slivered words shaken and stuffed full of intercalated syllables, to persistently contrive (as the comic Darry Cowl once did when his tripping tongue once got us giggling while his gibberish, full of stammers, metatheses, and quid pro quos, produced a panic of not being able to speak at all, the vertigo only dissipating in laughter), to take apart the words of their song, an extreme form, one might say, of what can already be found in our old comic operas: the precipitous stuttering so frequent in Rossini (close homonym of the gelatinous tenor Tino Rossi for words also know how to lie and sometimes need correcting) or the silly caesurae in several sections of offenbachian parodies unseasonably snipping the text.

From *Langage tangage: ou ce que les mots me disent*, 1985, pp. 106–112.

SECTION 2 DESIRE

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

Tr. by J. Clifford

We live in a period oppressive in all respects, and fetishism, which has been the base of our human existence from the most ancient times, only rarely finds ways to satisfy itself in an undisguised manner. Worshippers of poor phantoms—our moral, logical and social imperatives—we cling therefore to a transposed fetishism, a false image of what most deeply moves us. And this bad fetishism absorbs the greatest part of our actions, leaving almost no place for genuine fetishism, the only one worth the effort since it is entirely conscious of itself and does not depend on any dupery.

In the domain of art we seldom find any objects (paintings or sculptures) able in some measure to respond to the needs of this true fetishism, which is the really *loving* love of ourselves projected from the inside out and clothed in a solid carapace, thus trapping it within the bounds of a precise thing and situating it, rather like a piece of furniture for our use, in the vast foreign room called space.

In most cases these objects, though made by human hands, remain even farther removed from us than the products of nature of which they are slavish reflections and at the same time enfeebled, colorless, parodic shadows, incapable of providing us with a pole in opposition to the internal pole of our love.

Because of this lack of consistency, this absence of autonomy, almost all works of art are horribly boring, *sad as a rainy day*; and indeed they are much less close to us than drops of water, lovely little liquid spheres that can at least remind us of the form, if not the taste, of our tears and of that wetness, that fluidity which corresponds to the gentleness flowing through our limbs when we love or feel ourselves touched.

At the present moment, there exist few artists whose work escapes this atrocious boredom. In the past, fewer still. But among the rare contemporaries exempted by a special privilege from this rule we can name Giacometti.

There are moments that can be called *crises*, the only ones that count in a life. These are moments when abruptly the outside seems to respond

to a call we send it from within, when the exterior world opens itself and a sudden communion forms between it and our heart. From my own experience I have several memories like this, and they all relate to events that seem trifling, without symbolic value, and one might say *gratuitous*: in a luminous Montmartre street, a negress of the *Black Birds* revue holding a bouquet of wet roses with both hands; a packetboat on which I find myself a passenger slowly separating from the dock; a few scraps of a song murmured at random; an encounter in a Greek ruin with a strange animal that must have been some sort of giant lizard . . . Poetry can emerge only from such "crises," and the only worthwhile works of art are those that provide their equivalents.

I love Giacometti's sculpture because everything he makes is like the petrification of one of these crises, the intensity of a chance event swiftly caught and immediately frozen, the stone stele telling its tale. And there's nothing deathlike about this sculpture; on the contrary, like the real fetishes we idolize (real fetishes, meaning those that resemble us and are objectivized forms of our desire) everything here is prodigiously alive—graciously living and strongly shaded with humor, nicely expressing that affective ambivalence, that tender sphinx we nourish, more or less secretly, at our core.

So don't be content with what I'm heuristically calling *sculpture*. I prefer *DIVAGUER* [WANDER]; since these beautiful objects I've been able to look at and touch stir a fermentation in me of so many memories . . .

Some of these sculptures are hollow like ladles or emptied fruit. Others are perforated to let air pass through, moving grillworks interposed between inside and outside, riddled sieves nibbled by the wind, the hidden wind enveloping us with its immense dark eddy in those amazing moments making us delirious.

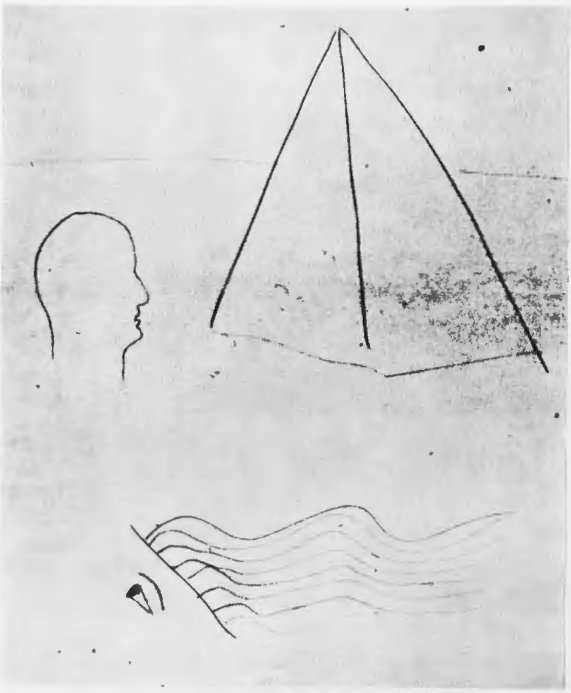
Giacometti was born on October 10th, 1901 in Switzerland (canton of Grizons): the son of a painter.

Until he was fourteen he remained in his village, then in 1915 he entered a *lycée* which he left four years later to take up painting or sculpture, something he had been wanting to do for several years. Six years of studies at the Arts and Crafts School in Geneva didn't interest him. Throughout 1921 he was in Italy, traveling everywhere. Nine months were spent in Rome. In 1922 he came to Paris for the first time. He was there on and off for three years, never staying long; but since 1925 he has taken up residence, except for two or three months spent every year in his native land. At first he frequented an academy to work from nature, but for several years now he has been working alone.

Giacometti is thus a very young sculptor. It's always stupid to make predictions, and prophets are often not much different from birds of ill omen. But how not give him our trust when we see these forms engendered by his fingers, figures so concrete, so obvious, absolute as creatures we

love, kneaded in the transient sweet salt of snow, the dust that falls from our fingernails when we polish them – impalpable cinders a lover would treasure like a relic – the marvelous salt so many ancient searchers believed they could extract from the earth's bowels, the salinity of waves and the stars which also have their tides, the salt, finally, of tears, tears of laughter, of despair or of lunacy, slight, vaguely malicious tears, grotesque tears, or heavy tears loaded with the salt of bones and frozen carcasses, drops of water always, falling relentlessly, sometimes boring a dazzling well through the mute rock of our lives, solid drops of water resembling this salt that still stirs our appetites, sea salt, bitter salt, salt of cracking knuckles, salt of teeth, salt of sweat, salt of looks . . . Here at last are stone dishes, bronze foods wonderfully alive and still able to awaken, to revive our great hunger!

"Alberto Giacometti," from *Documents*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1929, pp. 209–210.



"My life as I see it" (1928)

MOUTH WATER

Tr. by Lydia Davis

We are so used to the sight of our fellow human beings that we don't usually notice the monstrous aspect of each of the elements that go to form our structure. Only rarely does eroticism unleash great revelatory flashes of lightning that sometimes make us understand the true nature of a certain organ, suddenly restoring its integral reality and its stunning force, at the same time establishing as supreme goddess the abolition of hierarchies, of those hierarchies on whose different levels we normally file as best we can the different parts of the body, putting some high up, others low down (according to the value we attach to the different activities they are responsible for), the eyes at the very top – because they are evidently wonderful beacon-lights – but the organs of excretion as remotely far down as possible, quite below any water mark, in the wet caves of a sea stagnant with grief, poisoned by a million sewers . . .

Just below the eyes, the mouth occupies a privileged position, because it is the site of speech, the orifice of respiration, the den where the pact of a kiss is sealed, much more, we think, than the oily factory of mastication. On the one hand *love* is needed to restore to the mouth all of its mythological function (it is no more than a warm, damp grotto, though the teeth ornament it with hard stalactites, and within its folds the tongue lies hidden, a dragon guarding God knows what treasures!), on the other hand *spit* to make it tumble, all at once, to the bottom rung of the organic ladder, by endowing it with a function of ejection, even more repugnant than its role as doorway to be stuffed with food.

Spit is very close to manifestations of eroticism, because like love it "sweeps away" the classification of the organs. Like the sexual act performed in broad daylight, it is the epitome of scandal, since it relegates the mouth – which is the visible sign of intelligence – to the rank of the most shameful organs, and as a consequence man in his entirety to the level of those primitive animals which, possessing only a single opening for all their needs and being therefore exempt from that elementary separation of the organ of nutrition from that of excretion to which would correspond the differentiation of noble from ignoble, are still completely plunged in a sort of diabolical chaos in which nothing has yet been disentangled.

Because of this, spit represents the height of sacrilege. The divinity of the mouth is soiled by it every day. What value can we really give to reason, or to speech, or, hence, to man's so-called dignity, if we think that every philosophical oration, thanks to the fact that language and spit come from one and the same source, can be legitimately represented by the incongruous image of a sputtering orator?

Finally, spit, because of its lack of consistency, its indefinite contours, the relative imprecision of its color, its wetness, is the very symbol of *formlessness*, of what is unverifiable, of what can't be put into a hierarchy, the soft and sticky stumbling block which, better than any sort of rock, trips up the steps of everyone who imagines a human being to be something—*something other* than an unmuscled, hairless animal, the spit of a delirious demiurge who roars with laughter at having expectorated this conceited larva, this comical tadpole who swells up into a demigod's puffy meat . . .

"L'eau à la bouche," from *Documents*, 1929; *Brisées*, pp. 42–43.

Pour le texte original © Mercure de France 1966.

PHANTOM AFRICA (EMAWAYISH)

Tr. by J. Clifford

In the course of his ethnographic study of a possession cult in Gondar, Ethiopia, Leiris becomes erotically infatuated with Emawayish the beautiful "though a bit ravaged" daughter of Malkam Ayyahou, charismatic leader of a group of initiates possessed by "zâr" genies. (See Section 6, below, and the account in Manhood, *1984, p. 140.) His journal entry for 25 August, 1932, contains the following outburst: "Bitterness. Resentment against ethnography which makes you take so inhuman a position, that of an observer, in situations where it would be best to let go." Three days later, during an intense possession seance, Emawayish contrives to leave her mother, comes over to the bed on which Leiris is sitting and, in a gesture of apparent intimacy, places his hand under her armpit. The ethnographer is entranced by the songs she sings while possessed and wants her to write them down so that he and his Ethiopian co-worker Abba Jérome can make translations. Six days later the following entries appear:*

31 August

During the morning, letter from Emawayish. She would be pleased if I made her a gift of a blanket. Quite a natural wish, following my courtly

declarations of devotion . . . I'll never accuse a native of venality. Just imagine how insanely wealthy a European must seem to such poor people and how they must look obsessively on his smallest objects of comfort, as if they were treasures!

Right away this afternoon I go with Abba Jérome to see Emawayish and give her pens, ink, and a notebook so she can record for herself—or dictate to her son—the manuscript [of her songs], letting it be understood that the head of the expedition, if he is pleased, will present her with the desired gift.

Her maneuver of leaving her mother at the onset of her trance the other day may have had no other object than to get close and sit on my bed, the better to check out the blanket . . .

Just before dinner Lutten says in passing that he would like (and he speaks as if it were already done) to sleep with Emawayish. Although I'm preoccupied with her, I'm not in love with the girl; nor do I desire her. Still, Lutten's words torture me, for they make me reopen the wound which is still very much present despite my belief for the past few months that travel, the active life, had effaced it: impossible for me to be content like the others, to treat matters of love with nonchalance, impossible even to feel any enjoyment, ability only to invent incredible torments for myself.

Frantic intellectual activity in which I try especially to penetrate Emawayish's thinking so as to get a better grasp of her relations with her mother, transient desire felt by a young man [Lutten] with whom, by the way, I'm friends, but for whom making love is only a matter of pleasure or hygiene! Such are the elements in the balance; such the contradictory terms I'll never manage to reconcile in myself; this is the root of my awful unhappiness and of my disease. Petrified, certain that I will never, in any sense, be able to act, I weigh the import of this word: ETERNAL. A bullet in the head would be a good way to take care of everything: end the contradiction, avoid growing old, no longer suffer, and even accomplish (since I'm attached to this sort of thing) a perfectly elegant and proper gesture. I'll never pull it off—this single act—probably for reasons of pure cowardice.

But I'm also too isolated. I'm not getting any more letters. There's no one I can speak to from the bottom of my heart. I'm the victim of phantoms produced by what amounts to an internment; they're small phantoms, to be sure, that would melt away at less than a cock's crow but still terrible in spite of their emptiness since they touch my badly hidden wound.

Emawayish's words this afternoon when I told her, speaking of her manuscript, that it would be especially good for her to write down some love songs like those of the other night: *Does poetry exist in France?* And then: *Does love exist in France?*

1 September

Very bad night. First insomnia, then, very late, a little sleep. A dream of Z . . . [Leiris's wife], a dream I get some mail, which makes me feel better. Then suddenly, the smell of the herbs I've had scattered around my room enters my nostrils. Half dreaming, I have the sensation of a kind of swirling (as if reddening and turning my head I were doing the *gourri* dance characteristic of trance) and I let out a scream. This time I'm really possessed . . . But after noting this fact I sleep until 5 AM when [from a nearby military encampment] the Italian trumpet sounds an alert: a prisoner (one of the servants of the assassinated Colonel, a suspect in the murder) has just escaped . . .

During the day, though tired and enervated, I feel better. I realize I've been overworked, that I've been too caught up with research in a dangerous area. I begin to discern also a major cause of the violent pain that has afflicted me: a sudden recognition of my own doubts about what's been going on. The poetry is probably not as beautiful as I had thought, the possession states not as intense, perhaps boiling down to a few vague neurotic phenomena and also covering up quite a bit of merchandizing . . . But above all, and in contradiction to all this, an ardent sensation of being at the edge of something whose depths I will never touch, lacking among other things, an ability to let myself go as necessary, the result of diverse factors very hard to define but among which figure prominently questions of race, of civilization, of language.

An example that somewhat clarifies this conundrum also shows me the irreducible gap separating two civilizations: yesterday Emawayish casually mentions that she no longer washes her youngest son for fear that he will be attacked with an illness by *Rahiélo*. Now, *Rahiélo* is one of the principal zârs that possesses her mother . . . In saying this she indicates her belief that one of the spirits inhabiting the head of her mother is capable of killing her son. But she does not hold her mother responsible, complaining to her—when they converse—only about economic or family matters. In this way then, each person, Emawayish, her mother, Kassahoun the hunter (with the *abbigam* of the animal he has killed), Abba Jérome, myself, we all finally have heads populated by little genies who probably control all our acts (one for each category) without our being in any way responsible. This is what follows from all my friends' actions and from all their words. And so kinsfolk, without ceasing to frequent one another, will keep arguing over sordid interests, men will steal and kill, women will prostitute themselves . . . An atmosphere as splendid as it is unbreathable. So it is for me at least, imbued whatever I do with a civilization that leads one to give everything a moral rather than a magical tint. And this is the great boundary I will never cross . . . For example, it's hard for me to believe that it's not me suffering and rambl-

ing on at this moment, that I am surely possessed by a bad genie – maybe a succubus –, and that in any event there would be no grounds – for example, if I'm feeling lighthearted tomorrow – for giving weight to the words I pronounce today, since tomorrow, inspired by a happier genie, I will no longer be the same. But this is what any one of my local friends would think of my present state.

The attackers of Wadadjé came officially to make their excuses. Three men in turbans.

Two memories. The first recent, from a song by Emawayish:

You look at her neck, her breasts, her waist,
Smiling, she kills. Don't believe she's a woman!

The other one, older, was told to me about the sorceresses of Ségou by my old friend Mamadou Vad: "Once you've eaten their couscous you forget everything. You don't recall where you've come from, or why."

L'Afrique fantôme, 1934, pp. 358–360.

MIRROR OF THE BULLFIGHT

Tr. by J. Clifford

Looking at a *corrida* one has the impression, despite the very great part played by chance, of being in the presence of an impeccably ordered ritual: the left side of things is expertly played with, more and more openly given place, which is to say defined and drawn out in a way that lets it abruptly destroy itself and yield to the right [to the law, *au droit*].

In strictly erotic matters it is not so, even less in the extended domain of love, where analogous elements are at play but always in a wild state (constantly swollen outside their bounds) since they are too directly rooted in life to be dominated to this degree. Moreover we find neither the majestic ordering nor the optimistic finish of the *corrida*, which admits ambiguity only to resolve it almost immediately the way one cuts a gordian knot, and where the left, finally, is completely absorbed by the right.

Erotic excitation would probably not be possible without at least a confused idea of something supremely beautiful toward which we strain

and for which we feel a nostalgia (ravaged as we are in our mortal condition, our deepest unhappiness) or which, inversely, we enjoy debasing. The Christian myth of man's fall and redemption – left and right, perdition and resurrection – has its equivalent in the realm of the passions as the double theme of innocence stained and of an infamy that dirties us and is redeemed; either evil erupts within the good, corrodes and corrupts it, or good illuminates evil and, searing it with its flame, restores an extreme purity. But however inevitable this sort of dualism, everything still turns on sin's dark side. For if in some way innocence holds an attraction it is only because it appears as an oasis, miraculously preserved and constantly threatened.

In the act of love, directly or by contrast, there must therefore be a suggestion of that supremely beautiful and innocent thing (waters from the original well, Eden before the Fall) while at the same time this fault, this abyss, this vice will have to appear: either something properly *vicious* will be found in the desired object – put there through the erotic acts themselves – or else the distressed state one was plunged in at the moment of effecting coitus (a feeling of emptiness, lesion, lack) will play the role of this sin, this vice, since it is the *gauche* element, the element of misfortune.

So all in all it seems that sin, deterioration, dissonance, laceration – all things in some degree signs of a curse or, more broadly, of mischance – necessarily intervene in the apprehension* of the sacred, as the presence of a left side appears alongside a right, marking the ambiguity of which the sacred – which emerges at the precise instant one of the two elements tips over into its opposite – may well be only the most intense and lustrous expression.

In sum, everything takes place in the dangerous waters of an oceanic shelf as narrow as a razor's edge, a thin zone of interference, a psychological no man's land constituting the site par excellence of the sacred: the ridge where a taboo is erected (meaningful only as a constraint aiming to prevent a possible violation or sacrilege), the limit under whose gaze things abandon the disoriented, amorphous character of the profane and polarize into left and right.

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*In the double sense of the word, since you fear it at the same time it fascinates you. Only ambiguity gives the feeling of absolute understanding because at the point of ambiguity you embrace the two sides of the curve. This sentiment of absolute understanding is experienced when on the one hand you approach the tangency *from close enough* for there to be an illusion of real contact while on the other you have a perception of failure, pertinent knowledge of the fault.

As for the ideal projection by which we seek to counterbalance whatever is ominous in our existence, its real basis and active cause is our unhappy condition, for if unhappiness drives us to construct this sort of projection it also incites us to destroy it, as if in revenge for its deceptive, hallucinatory nature and for its growing domination.

Whereas the essential problem confronting all religions is the neutralization of evils and principally of death, the problem to be taken up by the fabricators of mirrors – those, that is, who by esthetic creation or any other means, make themselves into lucid artisans of our revelations – should rather be the assimilation of these evils, without caring for possible ruination or corruption, if to a degree they can be mythically transmuted into ferments of exaltation.

The senile occupation of most philosophers and builders of religions has been to banish death, masking it behind all kinds of timelessly perfect edifices. To incorporate death in life, making it in some sense voluptuous (like the *torero*'s gesture suavely leading the bull into the folds of his cape or *muleta*): such should be the work of the fabricators of mirrors – and by this I mean: all whose most urgent goal is to bring out some of those facts which appear to us as *places we feel tangent to the world and to ourself*, elevating us as they do to the level of a plenitude laden with its own torture and its own derision.

There is no way to attain this except by mixing into the alloy used for silvering our mirror (a play, erotic scene, poem, work of art) some element able to register what is distraught, endlessly miserable, and irreducibly *vitiated* in the most rigid or tender beauty. Without this nip of venom no alcohol is conceivable, since intoxication – however euphoric – can never be anything but a more or less faithful image of our future communion with the world of death.

From *Miroir de la tauromachie*, 1938 (1981 edition), pp. 63–67.

FAULT

Tr. by Lydia Davis

Smoking a cigarette as I drink my morning tea in my Paris bedroom, I sometimes have an unreasonable but keenly felt desire to smoke a cigarette. Now I am already doing just that – smoking – and so it is absurd to want to do what I am, quite simply, already doing. No doubt

what I really want is the relaxation the act of smoking gives me (sitting with my right elbow resting in the palm of my left hand, holding my Rothmans between the index and middle fingers of my right hand, bringing it to my lips to inhale the smoke deeply, detaching the cork tip from my lips and then exhaling the smoke, preferably through my nostrils, from time to time substituting my thumb for my index finger to free the latter so that it can tap the glowing end of the cylinder a few times and make the ash fall into the very cheap 1900 ashtray whose edge is ornamented with the head of a very young woman in high relief who is looking outwards with her eyes turned to the heavens, and who seems to be emerging from the two billows of interminable hair encircling the thick, shallow chalice of metal). But I have not relaxed, as I thought I would when I lit my cigarette at the flame of my lighter, and since I remain in exactly the same condition that I wanted to put an end to by smoking, I still have the same desire, born of the same feeling of lack, and the object of this desire – perhaps a fixed habit is producing a certain automatism? – is the thing I am already doing, which is ineffective and therefore leaves my desire intact – this desire for relaxation that should, reasonably, now lead me towards something other than this palliative which I am making use of without any result.

For a moment I am so entirely possessed by this desire that it doesn't occur to me that, as I smoke and think of smoking as though I weren't doing it, the object of my desire is the thing that I don't have to desire since I am doing it at this very moment and that, furthermore, this desire is absurd for another reason, because its persistence shows how useless the thing is, since it can't satisfy my desire despite the small, vague pleasure it gives. When, almost immediately, I discover that the thing I want to do is precisely the thing I am already doing, but that my desire, which was appeased in the minor form it took, remains unappeased, I am of course humiliated by my absentmindedness, as though it is a sign that my brain is deteriorating, but more than this, I become slightly dizzy, because I feel that even if my excuse could be the fact that I'm not yet fully awake, a sort of geological fault is manifesting itself here: the kind of fault that will continue to exist at a deep level even while at the surface our desire will have managed to be satisfied.

From *Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia*, 1981, pp. 98–99.

IN THE PROXIMITY OF GREAT MEN

by Lydia Davis

Last summer I went to Paris. I had not been there for many years, through no fault of my own. There were several great men I wanted to meet there, two of whom knew me through correspondence or through friends, and one of whom did not. I wrote letters to the two who knew me, but not to the one who did not. One of the two answered and agreed to meet me, but the other remained silent.

I asked some friends about the man who refused to meet me or even, this time, answer my letter, and they all told me what I already knew, that he does not meet with anyone, not even other great men of his own age or a generation younger, and that when these meetings are proposed, he answers that such meetings are not necessary: he prefers the friendship to advance by letter only, having a certain tension, for a conversation face to face would inevitably fall into banality.

While I still hoped for an answer from this great man, thinking he might make an exception in my case, and before I met with the great man who had answered my letter, I went out to find the house of the great man who does not know me.

I had the address and a map, and I walked, reading the map, up one avenue to a traffic circle and down another avenue away from the traffic circle, and then across on a little street from one avenue to another until I came to the avenue he lived on, then down that avenue in the wrong direction, and then up it again, until I found the house.

I stood in front of the house, looked into the entrance, saw the bank of mailboxes of which his must be one, and did not go in to stare at his mailbox because of a sudden excess of embarrassment. Starting back the way I had come, I turned a corner and went into a store that sold notepaper. I bought what I believed was the same notepaper on which the great man had once written some very brief letters to my husband in a very small, very sloping hand with black ink, and when I asked the woman who sold me the notepaper, I was told with pride and some sense of ownership that this great man did indeed come in here now and then to buy this same notepaper. I went away feeling unusually foolish, as all admirers of great men may sometimes feel.

In the same way, many years ago in Paris, when we were still young, my husband and I once found ourselves standing on a street corner next to this great man, across from a park. At the sight of him, my husband looked ill, then his color came back. Like children we followed the great man across the street and into the park, walking behind him at a distance of about ten yards. We watched the way he moved, striding along in his

corduroy suit with his briefcase hanging from the end of his arm, and we slowed down when he stopped a moment to look at a tennis match. At that point we turned away from his path, because there would otherwise have been no end to how long we would have followed him.

The third great man arranged to meet me in his office, which was in the basement of a large museum on a prominence above the Seine overlooking much of Paris. The museum was so close to a famous monument that it was surrounded by tourists milling in the morning sun and also by black vendors flying mechanical birds that were amazingly lifelike.

The handwriting of this great man, on the letter he had sent me, wavered as though seen under water. His voice also shook, when he greeted me outside the elevator in the basement corridor. He was shy, as I had been warned, and he fell into silence often during our conversation. I spoke very loudly so that he would hear me, because I had also been warned several times that he was deaf in one ear, but I was afraid he would wonder why I was speaking so loudly, and find it tiring to be with this loud woman in his small office half underground, where the window was now and then filled with the faces of curious tourists shading their eyes to see this woman sitting very erect on her chair across from this old man with the bald egg-shaped head, who fell into silence so frequently.

I am very glad to have met this great man, though I have only recently begun to know his work. I am sorry not to have met the great man who knows me by letter, because for some years I have felt a sympathy with him so deep that at times his work nearly becomes mine. In the case of the third great man, however, it is enough never to have met him, it is enough merely to have been, as I was briefly, in his proximity.

SECTION 3 DREAMS

NIGHTS AS DAY
DAYS AS NIGHT

Tr. by Richard Sieburth

Nuits sans nuit, et quelques jours sans jour, *first published in 1961, is a collection of a hundred or so short* récits *composed over the course of four decades. As the title implies (literally, "Nights without darkness, and a few days without light"), the texts in this volume pursue an extended pun on the porous demarcation between waking and dreaming. By transcribing the events of his daily life as if they were episodes in an ongoing dream, by recording his dreams as if they embodied the true narrative of his waking existence, Leiris in effect deconstructs the distinction between the two, leaving instead a play of mirrors which catch both night and day in an ever receding* mise en abyme.

The epigraph to Nuits sans nuit *—"Dream is a second life"—is taken from the celebrated opening of Nerval's* Aurélia*:*

> *Dream is a second life. I have never been able to penetrate those ivory or hornèd gates which separate us from the invisible world without shuddering. The first moments of sleep are an image of death; our thought goes numb and hazy, and we cannot determine the precise instant when the self, in another form, continues the task of existence. Little by little the dim cavern grows lighter, and the pale, grave motionless figures that live in limbo emerge from the shadows and the night. Then the tableau takes shape, a new brightness illminates and animates these bizarre apparitions: the spirit world opens before us.*

Like the curtain-raising of Aurélia, *the texts of* Nuits sans nuit *operate within the conventions and illusions of the stage, glimmering like mirages against a scrim of shadows. But whereas Nerval's dreamscapes simulate the spectacular sweep of 19th-century opera and diorama, Leiris's oneiric theater reflects more modern, and more modest, forms of entertainment—music halls, fairgrounds, circus shows, boxing matches, museum exhibitions, and above all, Hollywood movies, whose impact on the* mise en scène *of the collective dreamlife of our century Leiris was among the first to register.*

"I have always behaved as if I were on stage," Leiris confesses in L'Age

d'homme, *and the roles he executes in* Nuits sans nuit *are various: he is a hero of Greek or Racinian tragedy, martyr of the French Resistance, matador, bantamweight champion of the world, Chaplinesque victim of the Eternal Feminine, Ben Turpin, Gary Cooper, but most frequently he simply plays a mild-mannered minor functionary and author beset by the usual anxieties and fantasies of the average* homme moyen sensuel. *Whatever the scenario, however, Leiris's Nervalian insight into the essential theatricality of the self allows him to abolish the proscenium between dreaming and waking, spectacle and reality, and to subsume both into a single space of representation where, at once actor and spectator, he is free to perform his ritual impersonations of identity.*

Although dream is indeed a "second life," it does not follow for Leiris (and here he parts company both with Nerval and the surrealists) that it therefore constitutes a higher or deeper plane of reality. Instead, he conceives dream as a mere simulacrum or double *of life, a mirror in which the scenes of day—now condensed, now displaced—uncannily return as sheer repetitions or re-presentations. In the world of* Nuits sans nuit, *dreams (like identities) are copies for which there is no original: they do not provide access to a more authentic otherworld, they possess no genealogy that might lead us back to archetypical sources, their omens have less to do with prophecy than with chance. Or as Leiris succinctly puts it in his blurb for the book: "Dreams are not an evasion . . . dreams are not a revelation."*

This refusal to concede a facile otherness to dream is related to what Leiris, in an essay on Raymond Queneau, refers to as counter-exoticism. *Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the texts of* Nuits sans nuit *is their ordinariness, their deliberate dailiness, their eschewal of lyricism in favor of the unprepossessing prose of the world. Forgoing both the* dépaysment *of the Baudelairean* rêve exotique *and the sensational oneirorrhea of surrealism (soft watches and all), Leiris instead concentrates on estranging the familiar, on unsettling the commonplace, on eliciting the foreignness of the most domestic, local detail. And it is thus that* Nuits sans nuit *rejoins Leiris's autobiographical and ethnographic enterprises: all it takes is a minor adjustment of lighting or a slight troping of rhetoric for daily life to take on the uncertain distance of dream, and conversely, for dream to be demystified into the quotidian. In either case, the locus of Leiris's days and nights is always here and now—which is to say, already* elsewhere.

R.S.

April 12–13, 1923

One evening, upon entering my room, I see myself sitting on my bed. With a single punch, I annihilate the phantom who has stolen my appearance. At this point my mother appears at a door while her double, a perfect replica of the model, enters through a facing door. I scream very loudly, but my brother turns up unexpectedly, also accompanied by his double who orders me to be quiet, claiming I will frighten my mother.

December 22–23, 1923

I meet a woman in a movie theater, I speak to her, I caress her. Arm in arm, we go back to the little bungalow where she lives, on a street which is a sequence of brothels. She opens the bungalow door and leads me to her room: a young girl's room. She makes it clear that she is mine for the taking, but just as I am about to possess her, I am seized by second thoughts: this woman is a prostitute, and most likely diseased. I leap into the garden with a single bound and perch myself (exactly as a woman would perch herself on an armchair at the sight of a rat or a large spider) on top of one of the two stone pillars that frame the entrance gate. I hunker on this pedestal like a stylite.

As I am getting ready to leap into the street, I realize that I am in fact on the uppermost platform of the Eiffel Tower, so I hold back. For a moment, I consider climbing down the outside of the tower, clutching at the iron cross-bars. But knowing that I would suffer a fatal bout of vertigo, I give up the idea and resign myself to waiting for the arrival of the next elevator.

The platform is at once a ship's deck, an airplane, the tip of a lighthouse. I have no idea when I'll get down.

July 27–28, 1924 [excerpt]

[. . .] The word dream [*rêve*] has something cobwebby to it, as well as something akin to the gossamer veil that clogs the throats of people suffering from the croup. This is no doubt due to its sonority and to certain formal relations between the *v* and the circumflex accent that precedes it (this accent being nothing more than a smaller, inverted *v*); hence the idea of interlacing, of a finely woven veil. Dreams are spider-like, given their instability on the one hand and, on the other, their veiling. If dreams are like the croup, it is probably because they are linked to the notion

of nocturnal disturbances (like those bouts of false croup from which I suffered at night when I was a very small child).

March 14–15, 1925

Sidled up to a woman named Nadia—to whom I am drawn by very tender feelings—I am at the edge of the sea, a shore on the order of Palm Beach, a Hollywood beach. Playfully, just to scare the living daylights out of me and just to ascertain how hard I would take her death, Nadia, an excellent swimmer, pretends she is drowning. She in fact does drown, and her corpse is brought to me. I begin to weep until the play of words, "Nadia, drowned naiad" [*"Nadia, naïade noyée"*]—which comes to me at the threshold of waking—appears to be both an explanation and a consolation.

Undated
(half-asleep)

Gunshots in the night: a gigantic ram's head appears. Its two horns are two poles exchanging magnetic discharges. A woman, supine, bound hand and foot, suspended in the void, slowly passes between these two magnetic branches. A small, veiny drawing on her breast becomes a laceration, then thunder in a cloud, and the ram's head lets its fleece hang like rain.

September 1926?

They are performing a play in London falsely attributed to Alfred Jarry; the stage decor is straight out of music hall revues, and chorines are doing a ragtime song-and-dance.

The main character is a Greek—with whom, though I am merely a spectator, I identify now and then—and one of the other characters, also a Greek, is a wizard.

In one of the acts, the hero imagines that a regiment of French soldiers is parading by him. Since he does not salute the flag, an officer (who is quite real) leaves the ranks, revolver in hand. First he trains his weapon on the soldiers, then on the crowd, and finally on the Greek, who is none other than myself. He aims at his right eye and, after several moments of suspense, fires.

Everything vanishes. Then we return to Ancient Greece. Shortly thereafter, the Greek goes blind in one eye (as if the gunshot he had received were merely the prefiguration of this infirmity); soon he goes totally blind, having fallen under an evil spell.

Undated

I am going on a trip, so I have to move all the books in my library from one room to another.

Since the occasion calls for me to show one of my manuscripts to some of my friends, I go down to the street, rip from the pavement what appear to be trolley-car rails, and go back up to the apartment, dragging meters of rails behind me which bang on the stairs at every step I take. I then realize that my burden is in fact made up of a number of large glass objects similar to those coasters one used to find in middle-class living rooms and which were placed under the feet of the piano to protect the carpet or the floor. Because this is indeed my manuscript, I am fairly annoyed. But I manage to console myself, given the fact that my arrival provokes the following comment: "He's quite something, that Leiris! You ask him for a manuscript, and he drags back rails from the street." On the other hand, though these objects finally reveal themselves to be melting ice, and though the chain quickly dissolves, I hope I will be able to reconstitute some of its elements.

At the farewell dinner in honor of my departure, I am seated next to my niece. My sister, who is also present, tells me that her daughter—this niece next to whom I am seated—has just been "given her freedom in department stores," a legal phrase which means that she now has the right to do her shopping all on her own. The employees of the store where the ceremony took place are all agronomists. They celebrated her emancipation because she is interested in agriculture, and they spoke to her of a revolution (the Commune?) which is an agrarian revolution in which she played a glorious agrarian part.

May 15–16, 1929

The scene of action is a theater where I am performing a play with a woman, both she and I truly feeling for each other the emotions we are pretending to act out. At the end of the performance, she drags me off to a place which (retrospectively) I would describe as a kind of stairwell squeezed into another stairwell. I take her in my arms to make love to

her. Then I see her stretched out on the ground, naked.

On the line that runs from her sex to her neck, passing through her belly-button and the cleavage of her two breasts, there is a growth of long, blond weeds—humid, salty tufts planted at regular intervals. To me this woman then seems to resemble Z . . . or to be Z . . .

July 14–15, 1929
(half-asleep)

One of my incisors [*incisives*], having grown far out of proportion (as long and wide as a street), is vertically cut in half by a saw; the tooth thus becomes *Venice* [*Venise*].

Did this convergence of Venice and a sawed tooth come about via the word "laguna" which evokes the idea of a lacuna? There is, moreover, the rue de Venise which was for a long time the narrowest street in Paris.

July 18, 1929
(real life)

A pole about as long as a fishing rod, with an automobile horn attached to it about a third of the way up and topped off by a very old, very dirty white umbrella which is in turn crowned by a bouquet of flowers. The umbrella is open and although it sits too high on the pole to cast any decent shade, the man who is strolling around with this contraption as if it were some archaic parasol seems to be using it both as a fashion accessory and as an actual protection against the sun. Could it be some sort of learned apparatus that allows its bearer to provoke rain or shine at will? Somewhere between 40 and 45 years old (and thus nearly an old man in my 30-year old's eyes), his looks are working-class—thin, a small moustache traced across his face, dressed all in black, with a filthy white sweater. A black cap with a leather visor sits on his head and around his neck he is wearing a necklace of large nickel-plated beads reminiscent of those women's necklaces that were in fashion a few years back.

It's on a sidewalk of the rue d'Auteuil—the street where I was born but where I have not lived since early childhood—that I witness this, looking out from a trolley car whose route was discontinued so long ago that I almost ask myself whether it in fact ever existed.

April 22–23, 1933

In a film a female character—who is essentially a *mother*—briefly appears bare-breasted. At which point someone in the audience remarks: "She's good-looking, but her breasts are a little too long . . ." I immediately gather that "long" is an ironically euphemistic term for "saggy."

Rereading this note, I remembered an expression that a schoolmate and I used to use in high school (at Janson-de-Sailly, somewhere between 1914 and 1916), but in a completely opposite sense. A portion of the high school had been turned into a military infirmary, and among the Red Cross nurses we used to see around every day, there was one whose prominent, elegantly contoured bust we greatly admired. We dubbed her bust "ogival," proudly using an adjective which demonstrated our knowledge of medieval architecture, and enjoying ourselves like refined aesthetes whenever we uttered this sibylline term.

August 19–20, 1933
(Kerrariot)

Discussing some film, allegedly an old silent in which the American comedian Ben Turpin uses his celebrated squint to size up a nearby tree at a single glance—its trunk, its branches, its tip, its age, its growth rate. If the character played by Ben Turpin has such a remarkably wide field of vision, it is because he is so cock-eyed that his two eyes cross at a very obtuse angle.

Is this the first segment of an extremely long dream which is made up of disparate elements, or the first in a series of dreams I had during a single night while vacationing in Brittany several months after my return from a long trip to Black Africa? That night I met many people and visited an extraordinary variety of sites: a corner of Cairo or Barcelona; a gymnasium, a country fair situated on two floors of the same building, occupying both a concert hall and a theater; the Place de l'Opéra where a broad stream was flowing, probably in the wake of some political demonstration.

I long remembered the "corner of Cairo" and that beautiful tanned girl beneath the bluest of skies, making her way between the strawberry-colored houses whose *moucharabiehs* were ogival windows decorated with small pilasters, demi-rosettes set into the confluence of their curves.

March 27–28, 1934

I am with a woman close to my heart, on board a boat, about to disembark perhaps for a simple call at port, accompanied by Z . . . and several other acquaintances who are traveling in our party. Searching for a doll which my lady friend has just lost (just as several days ago she had lost her pocketbook at an actual ball we were attending), I comb the stairways and the parlors amid the crush of passengers. Meet a little girl (barely pubescent and probably related to that little lolita whose spunk so struck me when I gave that lecture-tour at the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography for a group of teenagers who belonged to the left-wing youth group, "The Red Falcons"). The doll the little girl is holding is the one I'm looking for, and I ask her for it. She gives it to me, proud to have found the lost item. I chat with her, we disembark together, and walk along the pier.

The little girl seems to enjoy my company greatly, and I notice that she is quite developed for her age (she's probably 12 or 13). After a while, it occurs to me that she's probably spent a fair amount of time with me by now: her parents are going to start worrying and wondering what on earth I am doing with her. So I tell her she'll get into trouble with her parents if she doesn't leave right away. She then explains to me that she is studying dance and, growing ever more flirtatious, she overtly sets out to seduce me.

I am now in a room, either in a hotel or a private apartment, to which I have been led by the young ballerina who soon becomes identified with the woman who had lost the doll (a woman whom I see almost on a daily basis without having to dream and whose young daughter I know). The girl-woman or the woman-girl – subsequently confused with Z . . . and no longer with her rival – had made preparations for a sort of bacchanalia: two sailors are present, along with two prostitutes, all four of them getting ready to make love at the same time, but without promiscuity. Things get delayed a bit. One makes sure that all the doors are shut tight. Then I get undressed and start, I believe, not by taking off my jacket (as I do in real life), but by dropping my trousers right away. At which point a door which we had not noticed opens: one of my three sisters-in-law, a spinster, enters, bringing a hot-water bottle or some other item of domestic comfort to my wife. The woman-girl and I are horribly embarrassed at having been surprised in the company of couples about to engage in group sex.

A detail of the interior decoration: a sort of wardrobe, tall and narrow, featuring three circular apertures in a vertical row which have been installed for voyeurs or which are themselves the heads of voyeurs. Several pistol shots are aimed at this wardrobe, probably by the sailors.

June 29–30, 1934

Upon leaving some ceremony which (probably) took place at the Trocadero Museum of Ethnography, I run into a famous psychoanalyst who is also a Princess* and whom I had seen two or three days earlier in real life. She berated me for my book *L'Afrique fantôme* (published in April), noting my "masochistic passivity." When I meet her in my dream, she takes my right hand, sinks her teeth into the phalanx of my bent index finger and remains in that position for some time as she walks and talks with me. She invites me to visit her at home so she can continue to give me her opinion of my travel journal. I consult my appointment calendar but find I am booked up.

In the course of the official events of the evening, a film about a composer was shown. The young hero of the film, an Austrian officer with a moustache, outfitted in a short military jacket decorated with frogs and loops, was singing a song which contained the word "Marcade." A contraction of the word "marquise" and of the supposed name of a flower, this word brought to mind (even before I awoke) the two main characters in a play by Roger Vitrac: Arcade and Désirade, the protagonists—one male, the other female—of his *Coup de Trafalgar.* The song is a satirical ditty which makes fun of the composer. The lyrics are translated for me: "When he directs, slow all his movements up," a phrase which was in fact addressed to the crew that shot the film, inducing them to engage in some sort of sabotage or practical joke which will victimize the musician who supposedly was to be honored.

Undated

It has been agreed that as soon as the 1937 Exposition opens I will take my young niece Germaine Lascaux to see a performance of *Carmen* there. Instead of the bullfight which is occasionally tacked on to the last act of *Carmen* (in open-air performances in the arena of Arles or elsewhere), there will be the following attraction: an animal trainer working at a typewriter with his back turned to his wild beasts.

Awaking, I realize that the trainer-typist (a substitute matador) is myself. Dozing off again to discover that the word he is typing on his machine is: *Public Opinion.*

*Probably Marie Bonaparte—trans.

Summer 1939
(real life)

"I am the Volcano . . ." a bearded man on the pier announces by way of introduction. We have just landed at Santorini.* Its volcano, very active at the moment, rises out of the water in the center of the nearly perfect ring that constitutes the inhabited portion of the island.

The individual who has thus announced himself (we almost had to pinch ourselves to make sure we weren't dreaming) is a Frenchman whose beard is of a very rich color, although not quite flaming red. He turns out to be the owner of the Volcano Hotel, which is where we end up staying. During dinner, having partaken of "Vulcanic Port Wine," we play our little part in a domestic farce whose major scenes take place in the wings: the proprietor of the hotel accuses his daughter of being a slut (she must have been sleeping around or have gotten pregnant), the mother moans and groans, the girl gets fresh, the father rants and raves, periodically interrupting his performance to come into the dining room to see whether we are satisfied with our meal.

Before dinner, we have no trouble finding a boat to take us to the erupting volcano, even though the area has been placed off-limits by the authorities. We walk around the tiny island; the water surrounding it is very hot and the island itself is grumbling and sputtering. We feel the burning ground underfoot and, somewhat apprehensive, observe the crevasses, the lava, and the eruptions of sulphur all around us. All this naturally makes us think of the war which, from the stray bits of news we hear, seems all the more threatening.

We decide to beat a quick retreat: there is a rumbling underground more powerful than anything we've heard so far and it is so close to us that we feel it—or believe we feel it—right under our feet.

March 3, 1942
(real life, Boulogne-Biliancourt)

While sitting up at night in the library which is heated by a stove and which has practically become our living room, an air-raid alert. The fascinating spectacle of the sky lit up with anti-aircraft flares. Ignoramuses, we gawk as if it were all a fine display of fireworks and, without missing a beat, we follow the merry-go-round of airplanes which we initially take

*The Greek island of Thíra in the Cyclades—*trans.*

to be the German defenses, unaware that this apocalyptic glare is not meant to detect attacking planes but rather to blind their approach to their bombing targets. Explosions over toward the Renault factories. Then a lull, during which my sister-in-law and our young blond-haired maid retire for the night, leaving my wife and me alone in the library, a room on the ground floor which opens out onto the garden. The calm is far from complete, but I force myself to read—as if nothing were—a novel by Robert Louis Stevenson, translated into French under the title *Le Reflux*.

Just as I am coming to one of the most crucial episodes in the book—a schooner suddenly bursting into flames—all hell breaks loose: the window thrown open amid a shatter of glass, a gust of wind dislodging the stove and showering dust and sparks all over the room. A number of ear-splitting shrieks are let out by our young maid (a dumb, incompetent but not unpleasant girl who would leave our service shortly thereafter and who, as we later found out, would become a nude dancer or something of that sort in a girlie show on the outskirts of Paris). We rush up to the second floor to find its two inhabitants safe and sound. Since I am the only male on the scene, I take command of the situation and order everybody down into the cellar.

Shortly before midnight, the air-raid alert ends and we leave the underground shelter where we had been shivering not from the cold (as we had believed), but from fear. The damage to the house seemed to be limited: some broken panes of glass, the ironwork and hinges of the windows all twisted, broken locks and bolts on the front and cellar doors, plaster strewn in the downstairs hallway. It was only afterwards that we would notice that one of the dividing walls had a crack running through it.

Have a look outdoors and am surprised to find the rue de l'Ancienne-Mairie littered with fallen shutters, shards of glass, and debris of all kinds; on the corner where yesterday an apartment building of 7 or 8 stories stood, there are now ruins and a huge fire. We pick our way through the chaos. Wearing a pair of old patent leather shoes (which I would put on every evening when I came home in order to save my other shoes from wear), dressed in a large double-breasted navy suit (which I had ordered at the "Petit Matelot" when times were beginning to get rough), I feel absolutely preposterous—a foreign body, as in those dreams in which the sleeper's nightclothes are transformed into some incongruous mode of dress—and I think of an American film that was shown in Paris a number of years before the war: it featured Clark Gable, dressed in a black suit, wandering through the fissures and the debris of the famous earthquake that destroyed San Francisco.

The aftermath: 600 dead and 2000 wounded in our district, according to morning rumors.

May 19–20, 1942

Condemned to death by the Germans, I take the thing manfully enough until I am told that they are going to come give me a shave in the early afternoon – a final grooming before my execution. Having concentrated all my attention on this final grooming, I had lost sight of the ultimate fact of my execution. But now that I know the hour at which it will take place, my mind can move beyond it, and the screen which had been placed between death and myself by this detail of protocol now disappears. Since there is no longer anything separating me from my execution, my courage gives way to an undescribable anxiety. I feel I will not be able to face up to the ordeal, that I will be led to the stake kicking and screaming.

I subsequently dream about the publication of the memoirs of my colleague at the Musée de l'Homme, Anatole Lewitzky (who was in fact shot by the Germans on February 23rd of this year).* Noting all the last-minute impressions of a man condemned to die, he tells how the execution took place on some abandoned World's Fair at the foot of the Mont Valérien. He was lined up with his friends with his back against a reconstructed African roundhouse made out of pisé or dried clay. Lewitzky reports that in front of the door of the hut that was serving as an execution stake, there was a chicken or the skeleton of a chicken on the ground (like those feathers of sacrificially slaughtered chickens or those animal skulls or jawbones that one sees on household altars in Africa). He closes with a kind of political testament or credo: rallying cries, confident predictions as to the outcome of the war.

One Week Later

The friends and relatives of Anatole Lewitzky have been given permission to visit him just before his execution. I set out to see him, terrified that I will arrive too late, but since I have always loathed running, I slow down my pace after a few meters.

I find Lewitzky in a large room, surrounded by most of the people who work at the Trocadero Museum. Under his floppy hat, his face with its slightly Mongol eyes and cheekbones strikes me as extremely pale (but no paler, in fact, than it usually was). I embrace him in tears. As a farewell gift, one of the museum staff offers him an enormous bowl of steaming

*The Musée de l'Homme was an early center of the Resistance. On the role of Lewitzky and other ethnographers see M. Blumenson, *The Vildé Affair – trans.*

soup. Very calmly, he sniffs the vapor of the soup and agrees to partake of it in our presence while we all stand around him (as if for some religious ceremony), deeply moved.

In 1955 I will rediscover something of the atmosphere of this dream and the preceding dream when, upon visiting the Cultural Palace of the Workers in Shanghai on October 12th, I see the series of photos depicting the revolutionary hero Wang Siao-ho, a worker at the central electric power-station who was shot by the Kuomintang. One of the photos shows him at his trial, young, handsome, smiling. Another photo shows him striding toward his death, showering prophetic invectives on the reactionary government.

August 28–29, 1942
(morning dream, Saint-Leonard de Noblat)

I am the actor Jean Yonnel and I am declaiming a Racinian sort of tragedy. Suddenly I no longer remember my lines. Speaking slowly in short jerky sentences though still maintaining my declamatory fervor, I proclaim that since present circumstances have made me become conscious of tragedy, I can no longer perform tragedy as I used to, a performance which only my lack of awareness of tragedy had made possible.

Beyond the moral significance of this theme (tragedy as an art form devalorized by the living experience of tragedy), there is also the way in which this theme is linked to the very process of awaking: as I regain consciousness (that is, as I leave sleep behind), I discover myself incapable of reciting my lines (or more precisely: I discover that I was only imagining myself to be reciting). Asleep, I recited or imagined myself reciting lines (to be exact: though I was saying nothing, I was nonetheless in the same emotional state as someone reciting his lines); but upon waking (already half-conscious), discovering that I will truly have to invent my lines instead of merely acting as if I were reciting them, I come up with a compromise. I continue to speak, but only in order to speak about speaking my lines.

One of my most powerful memories of the stage is Yonnel playing Orestes in *Andromaque*, his style of acting at once vehement and decorous, making use of every modulation of his fine voice. I remember leaving the theater, still in that heightened state which every spectacle ought to induce in us, and being horribly upset that I had to deal with the crush of the subway and with the hassles at the ticket booth because of some error I had made in small change. I railed against this obligatory return to my senses; I had been plunged into a myth, and in a split-second it had all evaporated.

March 19–20, 1943

The dream I am having becomes like a state of waking, which is about to end: unable to resist falling asleep in the dream itself, I sense that this dream is about to conclude, not with a return to reality but with a plunge into the void of unconsciousness. I prepare myself to cry out in fright, but Z . . . intervenes and my uneasiness stops.

A moment analogous to the one which often tends to elicit similar screams from me just as I am about to awake. But in this case the movement was considerably more frightening; instead of those interminable pangs which one experiences when emerging with difficulty from a dream, I was in a sense being precipitated downward by my dream, plunged into a sleep from which I would never escape, i.e. death.

May 16–17, 1944

I am to be executed because I am a member of the resistance or a hostage or for some entirely different reason, and this fact occasions a sort of fiesta on the part of my friends. I say my goodbyes to Z . . . , most heart-rending. I also say farewell to one of our friends whom I am very fond of—Simone de Beauvoir—or I am looking for her in order to say goodbye. No guards around me; I appear to be completely free. My friends are lined up in front of me two deep, like a crowd at the finish line of the Tour de France, and I pass by them, accompanied by Z . . . , who escorts me as if I were a child that needed soothing. We arrive at a wall of rock, full of crags and jagged outcroppings, where the execution is to take place; I place my back against it with Z . . . still by my side (to my right, I believe, squeezing my hand). I put my back to the wall as hard as I can, as if I were trying to encrust myself into it, not so much in order to disappear into it as to muster up in myself some of its rigidity—not physical, but moral rigidity, i.e. courage. I hear horses and perhaps the sound of marching troops. Sinking into abject terror, I feel all my bravado melt away. Then I grow furious and tell Z . . . that I'm not going to let myself be killed like this. Then I scurry off and plunge headlong into a sunken alley which runs parallel to the row of our spectator friends. The fall awakens me, or rather takes me into another dream in which I am explaining to someone the way I manage to cut short my dreams by deliberately falling.

Still asleep, I go over this dream in my mind and I repeat certain parts of it, varying the details. More specifically, this second version features a rectangle of white paper which is given to those who are about to be shot to death. They are allowed to write their last words on it, and when

the time comes for them to be executed, the piece of paper is placed not over their eyes but over their mouth, like a gag.

May 22–23, 1946
(after the grand opening of the "Madagascar" exhibition at the Musée de l'Homme)

Paul Rivet, my boss in real life (who, upon his return from America at the end of the war, has again taken over the reins of the institution for which I work), owns a large traveling circus somehwat like the outfit that used to be run by Colonel Cody, alias "Buffalo Bill." I make my way along a road with several friends, aware that this road will cut through the grounds that make up the immense ring of the circus. At the same moment a Cowboy and Indian show is taking place, a rodeo of sorts. Since I have always hated gunfire, I hope that our traversal of the circus ring will not coincide with the moment they start shooting off their pistols, a standard event in this type of show.

We arrive at the circus, but we are no longer anonymous passers-by but members of Rivet's troupe. Forming part of what in circus parlance is called the "rail," we are lined up at the entrance of the ring and are also supposed to contribute to the performance. For my part, I know that I will be a rodeo rider: I will not be expected to do tricks on horseback (all my life I've been a woefully clumsy rider); instead, I am merely to sit in the saddle, nothing more. I take off the raincoat I am wearing, since it's hardly appropriate to the occasion: after all, aren't the people on the "rail" usually supposed to wear livery?

March 4–5, 1947

I am battling a winged bull on the Place du Trocadéro, in front of the entrance to the Musée de l'Homme, but as I move in for the kill I realize he has no more consistency than a stuffed animal. Upon waking, this adventure leaves me with the optimistic conviction that we tend to make too many mountains out of molehills.

In another dream (which preceded this one by some 14 years and which was in turn the re-edition of an earlier dream), I was supposed to fight a boxing match for the benefit of the Museum. I was not at all happy with the fact and at the very last minute I chickened out, unabashedly declaring that I had no intention of being punched around.

The idea that fighting should be linked to my profession as an

ethnographer no doubt has to do with the fact that in 1931 the World Bantamweight Champion, Al Brown (a Panamanian Black who was so elegant in the ring that the working-class fight crowds used to call him "twinkle-toes"), fought a benefit match in the Cirque d'Hiver to raise money for the Dakar-Djibouti Expedition. There is also my memory of the admission a professional boxer once made to Picasso, and which Picasso reported to me as being very revealing of just how a boxer feels when he climbs into the ring: "It's as if you were going down to the bottom of the sea."

July 13–14, 1952
(real life)

It was two days ago that I left Basse-Terre in Guadeloupe on board the motorized yacht *La Belle Saintoise*. At Terre-De-Haut, the largest island in the archipelago of the Saints, I took room and board in the house of an old colored woman by the name of Mme Joyeux: Widow Joyeux.

Lying on a square bed that is so huge that I can use its entire left edge as a night table, I have been asleep for some time when I am awakened by the exquisite strains of dance music which is coming from some record player or radio and filters into my room from a neighboring house. A small combo which seems to me to be composed of a clarinet, a flute, and a guitar, playing beguines, mazurkas, and quadrilles in which I recognize—for no real reason, I admit—the old creole dance called the "haute taille."

During the following days in Guadeloupe, and then upon returning to Martinique before my flight to New York and France, I would question various acquaintances about this music. But my inquiries lead nowhere: none of my Antillean friends had ever heard of this bewitching combination of instruments, and the riddle of this dream music would remain so unsolved that I would wonder whether it had not in fact come to me in a dream.

October 31, 1955

On a Paris street I meet two young women, both of whom are charming and attractive, even though their Salvation Army act makes them somewhat ridiculous. They are hawking a Protestant newspaper, and are trying to win me over to their cause: "What do you read? Are you politically committed?" These are the kinds of questions they ask as they try to

provoke me into some real soul-searching.

I had this dream while returning from Peking, as I was sleeping in the plane between two stopovers in Siberia. Both on the flight to China and back, I was overwhelmed by the variety of vistas in the daylight below (above all, I remember the forests of birch and larch and maple and the steep mountains, their escarpments striated in black and white like Chinese landscape painting); and in the blackness of night, I was struck by the great expanses of snow, now and then punctuated by a cluster of lights indicating some industrial center. The flight was broken up, like a stage-coach journey, into a number of stops: a stopover here for a meal in a real country inn, its tables cluttered with crystalware; a stopover there to spend the night in a hotel so overcrowded with passengers that it turns into a caravanserai. Both on the flight out and back my friends and I were attended by stewardesses wearing peasant scarves on their heads or fur hats that were half-cossack, half-Coldstream Guard, tall and jutting down over the forehead.

Upon waking, I realize that the dream I just had was situated in France, whereas during my several weeks in China all my dreams were Chinese (though my dreams were rare since my busy schedule left few hours for any sleep with the density of dream). In this particular dream – the only one I had the time to note down during my visit to the Far East – is there any local color I can find? None whatsoever, unless it has to do (perhaps) with the kindness of these two women and their cheerful commitment to their cause. Among our interpreters and among the various people we met in Peking and elsewhere, there were a number of these girls or women whose earnestness only added to their attractiveness; as certain women inspire dreams of pleasure, so these women made me dream of political activism and commitment.

At Krasnoiarsk, I set my watch to local time and noted that we had landed at 8:25 P.M. and not at 1:25 A.M. as my watch indicated. We landed at Novo-Sipirsk at 11:40 P.M. (according to my watch, which I had reset when we changed time-zones). But in the cafeteria where we are waiting to reboard our flight, the clock says 3:45 A.M., so I can't figure out what the hell is going on . . .

January 6, 1958
(real life, Neuilly-sur-Seine)

After having been anesthetized for minor surgery, I find myself back in my hospital bed. At first, it seems to me that I have been in this bed all the while, but this erroneous impression is soon rectified, and I try to recapitulate everything that has happened. I am seized by great anxi-

ety because I can locate no slice of lapsed time, however abstract, corresponding to the density of time that has passed, without my knowledge, between the sudden plunge I took after the pentothal injection and the moment I reawoke in my hospital room. No sleep is quite like this sort of blank or void. Whereas with sleep one can always more or less measure its opacity or its duration, here was something that seemed never to have existed at all: at one fell swoop you sink into something undescribable, and then you are back on your feet again.

Like some strange lesion, this experience would continue to haunt me for some time—it was not so much the void that bothered me, but rather the gaping fault-line represented by this truly *dead time* that had been cut out of my life by the stroke of an axe.

SECTION 4
SELF . . . INTERMINABLE

from BIFFURES (CROSSOUTS)

Tr. by Lydia Davis

Note

There can be no question of not including the French words that Michel Leiris is particularly talking about in Biffures. *These are no instances of arbitrary word play, one as good as another, which a clever translator can approximately equal in her own language. Rather, they are knots where many threads of the author's remembrances and associations come together from every direction of his past and present to be joined forever either tidily or untidily in a word or in a few words taken together as a phrase. Michel Leiris's life has not been an American or English life, and the language of that life, past and present, has not been English. This new, English text, not the same text as the one Michel Leiris wrote in French, must, because of the nature of Michel Leiris's original text, be tied back to that original with these same knots, so that the two texts are part of the same tangle.*

Does this show up, yet again, the undeniable failure of any translation?

The ideal "translation" would be, along the lines of Borges's "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote, *" one in which every word was matched by the same word in the same language but now not quite the same because written again, by a translator, and, ideally, now understood by its readers, whatever their native language, so that the readers themselves would have been translated into a position to understand. In the present text, in all awkwardness, readers have been given a cruder way, the way of translation itself as it must actually be, to "understand" the words that can only remain in the language their author wrote them in.*

L.D.

The soldier had fallen onto the pitiless floor of the room (the livingroom? or the diningroom? a fitted carpet with faded floral patterns or a rug with some other design in which I inscribed palaces, landscapes, continents, a true kaleidoscope delightful to me in my childishness, as I designed fairyland constructions on it, like a canvas for some thousand and one nights which hadn't yet been revealed to me by the pages of any book in those days? or a bare floor, waxed wood with darker traces, cleanly cut by the rigid blackness of the grooves from which I sometimes liked to pull up tufts of dust with a pin, when I had been lucky enough to find one that had fallen from the dressmaker's hands during the day?) onto the irreproachable – the soulless – floor of the room (velvety or ligneous, dressed up in its Sunday best or stripped bare, favoring excursions of the imagination or more mechanical games), in the livingroom or the diningroom, in shadow or light (depending on whether it was the part of the house where the furniture was usually protected by dust sheets and where the modest riches were often screened from the sun by the bars of the shutters), in the special enclosure that was hardly accessible to anyone but the grownups – a tranquil cave for the somnolent piano – or in the more common place that contained the large, many-leaved table around which all or part of the family would gather for the ritual of the daily meals.

A soldier. Made of lead or papier-maché. A rather delicately shaped and colored figurine, or one of those sloppily rough-cast little men splashed all over with blue, red, white, and black, whose bodies, when they break, appear to be made of some poor, dubious material, whitish or earthy-colored.

A new soldier or an old one. One that I had set up earlier alongside his fellow soldiers – or others of different designs, a mixed army! – on a good solid table or on a light pedestal table perhaps ornamented with curios or animal figures such as long-beaked storks, if this pedestal table was actually a part of one of those "stork tables" which (as the name indicates) can only be covered with storks.

Probably a French soldier. And it had fallen, slipped from my awkward hands, which were still incapable even of writing simple lines in a notebook.

The important thing was not that a *soldier* had fallen, that a military figure – and not some other creature – had been the victim of this fall. At that time, I don't think the word "soldier" corresponded to anything very precise for me. No doubt I barely knew that you could recognize a French soldier by his red trousers. Perhaps I had already gone into raptures in front of the window of the Meurdefroy grocery in the rue d'Auteuil over an advertising poster portraying a scene in a mess hall or canteen whose protagonists – played by cutout cardboard figures – were men dressed in

fatigue coats or wearing blue tunics and red pants. Perhaps I had already fixed my eyes on this comical animated tableau with its clashing colors as I was being taken up the rue d'Auteuil for a walk in the Bois. But I certainly didn't yet have any special interest in "soldiers"; I wasn't at all concerned about knowing the various uniforms and I had only a small set of soldiers, not the rich collection I would have later on, which especially included tin soldiers (bought a few at a time, in oval boxes of thin wood that cost 13, 19, 28, or 32 *sous* depending on their size) and of which the brightest jewel was a troop of medieval warriors—horsemen in gold and silver armor—facing one another in a tournament, their lances pointed and their mounts at a gallop.

The important thing was not that a soldier had fallen: I had no definite response to the word "soldier." What mattered was that something belonging to me had fallen and the thing that belonged to me was a toy; the thing that had fallen was part of the closed world of toys, which you shut up in boxes when you were done playing with them; it was part of this marvelous, separate world whose elements, through their shape and color, contrast so strongly with the real world, at the same time as they represent perhaps its sharpest features. A world apart, superadded onto everyday life just as engraved initials are added onto metal drinking cups and watch-charms onto watch chains; an intense world, like everything in nature that gives the impression of being *something for show*: butterflies, poppies in wheat fields, shells, stars in the sky, and even mosses and lichens, which are like decorations on rocks and tree trunks.

One of my toys had fallen—and it hardly mattered which one: enough that it was a *toy*. In great danger of being broken, because the fall had been direct and the height of a table from the ground, even a simple pedestal table, is far from negligible, when the fall of a toy is involved.

Because of my clumsiness—the initial cause of the fall—one of my toys came within an inch of being broken. One of my toys, which meant one of the elements of the world I was most closely attached to, in those days.

I bent down quickly, picked up the fallen soldier, felt it all over and looked at it. It wasn't broken, and I was very glad. Which I expressed by shouting: ". . . Reusement!"*

Someone older than me—my mother or my older sister or brother—happened to be with me in this ill-defined room—livingroom or diningroom, formal room or family room—in this place which was simply my play place then. Someone more experienced than I, less ignorant, who

*A clipped form of "heureusement," happily, fortunately, luckily.

heard my exclamation and pointed out to me that I should say "heureusement" and not, as I had said, ". . . Reusement!"

This remark cut short my joy or rather—disconcerting me for a moment—immediately replaced my joy, which had at first completely filled my thoughts, with an odd feeling, a feeling whose strangeness I can barely manage to fathom now.

One doesn't say ". . . reusement," but "heureusement." This word, which I had used until then without any awareness of its real meaning, but simply as an interjection, was related to "bonheur" [happiness, luck] and the magical power of this relation suddenly inserted it into a whole sequence of precise meanings. To perceive, suddenly, a word in its entirety that I had always mangled before felt like a discovery, as though a veil had suddenly been torn away or some truth had exploded. This vague utterance—which until now had been completely private and had remained in some sense closed—had suddenly and fortuitously been promoted to the role of a link in a whole semantic cycle. Now it was no longer something of my own: it was part of a reality which was the language of my brothers, my sister, and my parents. It had changed from something belonging to me into something communal and open. There it was, in a flash, transformed into something shared or perhaps *socialized.* Now it was no longer the confused exclamation that had escaped my lips—still visceral, like a laugh or a shout—it was one of thousands of other constituent elements of the language, of this vast instrument of communication whose life outside me, filled with strangeness, I had been allowed to glimpse through the chance remark of an older child or an adult concerning my exclamation after the fall of a soldier onto the diningroom floor or the livingroom rug.

The lead or papier-maché soldier had just fallen onto the floor of the diningroom or livingroom. I had cried out ". . . Reusement!" I had been corrected. And for a moment I was dazed, seized by a sort of vertigo. Because this word, which I had pronounced wrong and which I had just discovered was not really what I had thought it was before then, enabled me to sense obscurely—through a sort of deflection, the shift that was imprinted on my mind because of this—how articulated language, the arachnean tissue of my relations with others, went beyond me, thrusting its mysterious antennae in all directions.

SONGS

When you don't know how to read yet, when you haven't yet systematically learned the longer or shorter lists of words in an anthology like the *Pautex,* which is intended for schoolchildren in the lowest grades

and helps them enrich their vocabulary by teaching them new words in each lesson (words that are grouped according to their meanings and not arranged in alphabetical order as they are in lexicons and dictionaries), when you haven't yet been initiated into the great mystery of reading, or are still a beginner and have just barely entered it, the only way you perceive words is by hearing them, and because of this they assume strange forms that will be difficult to recognize when you see them written, black on white. How many oral monsters are dreamed up in this way! How many preposterous creations, existing on a scale that will later seem fantastic!

If ordinary language already seems to be full of pitfalls (how many words and expressions are transformed or distorted in their meanings and give rise to troubling images! . . . like the image of a *weeping cookie* or a cookie whose rippled surface is sweating, an image concocted by a child who hears the colloquial expression *"pleurer comme une Madeleine"** and doesn't yet know about the repentant saint); if the most common speech – the speech he hears every day – proves to be full of enigmas and difficulties for the illiterate child, then what about the language of songs, in which rhythm, a special way of linking words, and the music itself mischievously manage to spread confusion and turn the sung phrase into a pronouncement as obscure as any that ever issued from the lips of an oracle!

One of the simplest examples is "dansons la capucine . . .",** where it isn't a matter of dancing the female of a Capucin monk (even less, of dancing a dance introduced by the Capucin monks) but of dancing a flower:*** in this case, no monster is created, and furthermore, it is completely natural for a round dance to be compared to the shape of a flower. I wasn't very baffled, either, for example, when I heard the spinster I had to call "Aunt Adele" (later – perhaps because she was very corpulent? – her name was always associated in my mind, like a rhyme, with "citadelle"), when I heard this spinster, who was not a relative of ours, but the real or adopted daughter of the owners of a house in Nemours that my father and mother rented for the summer at that time, sing to her parrot, who was shut up in a cage whose roundness could also have evoked the idea of a citadelle:

Quand je bois du vin clairet
Tout tourne, tout tourne,
Quand je bois du vin clairet

**pleurer comme une Madeleine* = "to cry one's eyes out," literally "to cry like Mary Magdalen" – but a "madeleine" is also a kind of cookie.

***dansons la capucine* = "let's dance the capucine"

****capucine* = "nasturtium"

Tout tourne, tout tourne
Au cabaret.

When I drink red wine
Everything turns, everything turns,
When I drink red wine
Everything turns, everything turns,
In the cabaret.

"Clairet" seemed to me to be, not a qualifier of the wine, but the name of the parrot. Singing like a ventriloquist—any one of whose innumerable voices is always intolerable to listen to because one senses that it is entirely fabricated (and even his natural voice, which is finally upsetting too, because in contrast to the others it has such a false ring)—the idiot bird wandered around and around, waddled about, acted like a drunken man behind his metal bars until the moment when, with his wrinkled foot or his curved beak (a false Mardi Gras nose attached to his artificial voice for some sinister carnival), he took hold of the tidbit that was given him as a reward for his performance—alternately mumbled and screeched—of a few fragments of the song:

Quand je bois du vin, Clairet!
Tout tourne, tout tourne
Au cabaret!

When I drink some wine, Clairet!
Everything turns, everything turns
In the cabaret!

As for the "cabaret"—this cabaret in which everything was turning around, as in the head of the wine-drinker (who ended up becoming confused with the so-called Clairet himself)—what else could that really have been but the cage, the round cabin where the parrot—like a drunkard dressed in stunning green—was staggering about. And all these images rolled about together in my own head: Aunt Adele, as round as a tower, pretending to be drunk in front of her parrot in his round cage and not calling him "Jacquot" except to ask him if he had had a good lunch, as though this name could only be used for the customary question about food and as though for everything else—especially everything to do with drink—the acid colored bird with the vicious beak should never be called anything but "Clairet."

This bird, with his drunken waddling and aggressive livery (the color of a billiard table, like the famous suit—I was told the story later—that a certain stern father ordered for his son and that he forced the son to wear until it was threadbare, because the son was inclined to hang about in cafes and one day, as he was playing billiards, he had clumsily torn the billiard cloth, whence the anger of the cafe owner and the need to

repay him for the damage done, which was what motivated the harsh behavior of the father, who was equally mindful of morality and economy), this parrot with his stylish name – very much Fanfan la Tulipe,* with the blustering moustache of a soldier of the gardes-Françaises** – had nothing about him, either, however odd he was, that could put him in the category of monsters, those creatures of ill-defined shape and no clear adherence to any group, those sudden abstractions who have plummeted from a sky frosted over with a confusion of ideas or clouded over with nightmares. Quaint bird of the isles and clothed all in green, he really fit quite naturally into the domestic landscape, where he functioned as an accessory and where one scarcely noticed his costume, which was perhaps hardly more garish than the bright sundresses that enveloped the embonpoint of the fat spinster I called "Aunt Adele."

This spinster's own aunt and uncle, a couple of old horticulturists known as "the Tréforts," already provided me with a name I could speculate about freely, having fun with my brothers. So did the place where they all lived, *Chaintréauville*, which partook of a cat, one cat, or rather a multitude of cats, enough to throng an entire city. The Très-forts of Chatstréauville.*** However, it was a song my second brother knew that opened a door to another world for me more effectively than any of these verbal rattles that clinked like a waffle man's wheel or a zoo turnstile. This other world was also one made up of words, but nothing farcical leered out from it, it was untainted by puns and drew its emotive power from the very mist of words of which it was formed, an indecipherable nebulousness.

Blaise qui partait
En guerre s'en allait,

Blaise who was leaving
Was going off to war,

sang my brother; but that was not what I heard. Between his lips and my ears, the second line changed, and what reached me, the problem I had to solve, was:

Blaise qui partait
En bercant la laisse

**Fanfan la Tulipe*: traditional name for the jolly, amorous and bibulous French soldier of the eighteenth century.

***gardes-Françaises*: infantry regiment of the King's household, disbanded in 1789.

****Tréforts* is a homonym of *très forts* or "very strong." *Chaint* is close in sound to *chat*, or "cat." *Ville* means "city."

Blaise who was leaving,
*Rocking the beach**

A fragment of a very old-fashioned and unremarkable song from the *Dragons de Villars* was thus transformed, by my ears, into a mystery to be cleared up.

What could this "beach" be, that was going to be rocked? And who was this Blaise, who "rocked the beach" and whose name, if one simply removed the initial consonant and changed a voiced fricative into an unvoiced fricative, yielded the word designating the unknown thing that he should be rocking, as though for all eternity there had been a link between this name and this object, and as though the foreordained task of this man named Blaise, as the very texture of his name indicated, was to rock the "beach"? There wasn't any versifier's or linguist's subtlety involved in the confused perception I had, then, of the relationship of assonance between the two words; first there was the mystery of the "beach" and it was this mystery that extended to the name of Blaise, by virtue of the very structure of the sentence (in which Blaise was in the position of a subject) and, more obscurely but just as effectively, by virtue of this play of assonances, the dim sparkle of foam beneath which were revealed the machinations of an unmanifested power.

If I listen carefully—to try to rediscover, or reinvent, the echo that brought to my ears, or my understanding, the message that was mumbled rather than articulated and that emanated from what I later thought was one of the mouths of the marvellous thing itself—I hear the word "Blaise" resonate like something profoundly sad and as pale as a chalky cliff. Nothing can be attached to this Blaise, whose name, dissyllabic though it is, is endlessly drawn out, but the monotonous gesture of rocking. He rocks, he rocks endlessly, just as the sea—according to the cliché—never tires of rocking the foot of the cliff. He rocks, he rocks tirelessly, and the "beach" that he does not stop rocking is perhaps none other than the pure object of this rocking, or perhaps the particular quality which, among all the others, distinguishes such a rocking. "To rock the beach," as one "champs at the bit" ["ronge son frein"], as one "eats one's heart out" ["broie du noir"], as one "beats a retreat" ["bat la chamade"]: an image that is even more an image of a certain way of rocking; a figure of speech that doesn't correspond to any physical action, but only to the fog of a whitish state of boredom, even more colorless than the most plastery Gervais cream cheese. "To rock the beach": the only action poor Blaise could take,

*The French *laisse* is more specific: the strip of sand between the high-water mark and the low-water mark.

the only mental attitude he could assume, Blaise who was leaving and whose silhouette would soon appear against the gray cliff. Leaving, with the monotonous and tired beat of his feet . . . not even a beat, but a murmur . . . the formless murmur of his untiring lips that said over and over:

Blaise qui partait
En bercant la laisse,
Blaise qui partait . . .

Blaise who was leaving,
Rocking the beach,
Blaise who was leaving . . .

The influence that songs have always had on me—whether they go back to the very earliest times, like the ones I remember hearing when I was a child, or are quite fresh and, conversely, powerful because of this very freshness, which is free of all the dross that time accumulates—may in part result, if not from such unintentional masquerades of words, at least from a certain form of play closely related to the pun. A play that occurs between the tune and the words and such that the tune, intruding into the words, sometimes appears synonymous with them—miraculously capable of intensifying their meaning—and sometimes keeps to its own part and doesn't involve itself with them except to tangle their thread or to amalgamate into insoluble enigmas the rhythm, the sound, the significative value of the words and the melody. In this way, exchanges take place between the properly musical phrase and the purely verbal music of the phrase: conjunctions followed by breaks occurring more or less immediately, progressions that are parallel for a while or diverging steps that suddenly prove to be confluent; and in the text itself, an irrefutable fragmentation takes place that coincides only partially with the meaning and injects into the crystalline parcels or groups of words cropping up from the surface of this harmonious chaos a more intense viridity, an unexpected combination of mirrors, lenses and prisms shattering the light in order to make it rise up again from the negative summit of its blackest depths. It's incredible, it's more baffling than any of the experiments described in books of physics-for-fun!

Along with the already special luster of the words—changed into pearls by the very fact of being strung in couplets—is yet another luster, which takes their potential for magic as far as possible: this is the luster in which the flow of music plunges them, whether its waves disperse them and shatter them, allowing the nacreous globe of a jellyfish to appear here and there, or whether just the opposite happens—the pearls and the waves join their ill-assorted limbs tightly in a long, glistening loop. Reduced to shards—which captivate our eyes with the gleaming of their broken edges and the strangeness of their angles—or simply resolved into the fluidity

of a line—which we follow from note to note, from syllable to syllable—phrases steeped in music acquire a completely special luster that separates them from ordinary language, surrounds them with a halo of magnificent isolation. A more effective treatment than commonplace typographical artifices, whatever may be the attraction, for the eye and the mind, of, say, italics, large type, footnotes, words marked with asterisks, even the blank spaces poets use, which split up the sentence and consequently allow the written words to emerge—thicker and more active chemical bodies because they are just now being born—from the invisibility of the page.

The same kind of special nature was attached to certain words in a religious allegorical tale I was told during my first communion retreat: according to this tale, the most fervent prayers are written in the book of God in gold ink, whereas others, less fervent, are written in silver ink, and still others—the ones that are recited in a perfunctory way—are written in ordinary ink or not written at all. And more generally—like these prayers, in which what mattered was not their greater or lesser degree of fervor but the distinctive ink, silver or gold, in which they were written—in a vaster domain that paralleled that of discourse and extended, almost, to the whole world, everything also became special that was qualified in one way or another by a special appellation in which a proper noun figured, a proper noun that in effect became its *name* and turned it into a sort of person, a being endowed with its own life, provided with its own face; as, for instance, Falières phosphatine, Flavigny anise, Bar-le-Duc jams, sticks of apple-flavored Rouen sugar candy, and, among other medicines, Manceau syrup, Ramy compounds, "soothing balm," *ipeca cuanha* (in this case, the pharmaceutical name functioned as a person's name), creatures that emerged, because of the reference points formed by their names (indications of provenance, scientific terms, or simply trademarks), from the rather indistinct fog of things that, in the world as a whole, did not have the benefit of being immediately called to one's attention this way by a *distinctive mark* that acted as a stigma or seal.

The aim of this passage—which seems contentious to me even after just a quick rereading, or at least somewhat overly subtle and not entirely free of those evasions thanks to which the uncertainties of one's thinking are masked by the flashiness of the words, and what tends to be mere verbal clarity is substituted for the clarity of ideas—is to introduce a fragment of song that I hesitate to bring forward because the charm that invests it, in my opinion, is a little too particular and personal for me to be able to reveal its one line right away, without the sort of preparation that can form a bridge between the author's intimate emotion and the reader's consciousness, or rather to create between the two of them the indispensable conducting medium in which a current has some chance of

being created, a series of waves some chance of being propagated by the apparently cold and inert little pebble that lies hidden from everyone in a corner of the author's head or heart. Because for the writer, this is the whole point: to transmit into the head or heart of another person the concretions that have been deposited by his present or past life in the depths of his own head or heart and that have been valid only for him until then; to communicate something in order to make it more valuable; to let it circulate, so that once it has been cast out to others it will come back to him a little more marvellous, like the shields of the Northwest American Indians that are endowed with greater and greater value the more times they have been the object of ceremonial exchanges. But even the most ordinary exchange can't take place without a minimum of ceremony. Whence these ostentations of writing, these invitations, this swaggering, all these artifices, which are as entirely natural as a peacock spreading its tail or the various stratagems of courtship.

If I have a memory in my mind and it extends in all directions, through emotional ramifications, it is not a foreign body to be extirpated. Even though it has come to me from outside, even though it is the result of an absolutely fortuitous conjunction of circumstances, it is nonetheless an integral part of me, it has become my substance just like the food from outside me that I eat. Even more so! As it remains an image—an image that is circumscribed and separate, as it is supposed to be—it tends to reverse roles and pose as a mirror, as though in relation to it I lost all real consistency and could no longer consider it anything else but a solid thing—the only solid thing—that I look at and that throws my reflection back at me. The paradox of this kind of memory: in it I find the purest expression of myself, to the extent that it struck me because of what it concealed that was strange to me . . .

"As odd as it is strange," we sometimes said jokingly in my family. Very surprising and very strange was this line from the duet in *Manon*, as I heard it sung by my sister—a girl already in long skirts.

Adieu, notre petite table!

Farewell, our little table!

says Manon, conscientiously pronouncing the silent *e* separating the last two *t*'s of the series of three, the last two which seem to be merely the lurching echo of the first, over which the tongue has stumbled. *Ti-te-ta*. The *e* of *te*, between the *i* of *ti* and the *a* of *ta*, far from being skipped over, is sufficiently prominent so that the syllable *te* derives a sort of consistency from it, it thickens and tends to metamorphose into an object and, forsaking the adjective "petit," clings to the substantive "table," which designates a solid body, a mass made of heavy wood whose attractive force is greater than that of the adjective "petit," which hasn't even the

particle of reality of a slight breath of air. So here is our table changed into *tetable*, into *totable*, having become a masculine noun naming some peculiar instrument or other: an "étable," a "retable," a totem, a washbasin with water that is either "potable" or "non potable," all the words that come to my mind right now to label an indefinite thing of which I only know that it was an object, a thing occupying a bit of space in a room where Des Grieux and Manon were saying farewell to each other, a thing that was at once well and truly a table and a little more than a table to which was added—like an extra leaf—the peculiar quality that transformed it completely and that was inexpressibly expressed by the prefixing of the *te* torn from "petite."

After the great leave-taking scene, one of the next scenes takes place, not in a room, but at the Saint-Sulpice seminary. It is quite clear that there are prayer stools here (since seminary means church), which indicates other pieces of furniture that can also move, that can scrape or bump their feet when they are shifted around, like pedestal tables; their backs are often covered in velvet, generally faded, just as you often see shoddy looking cloths on pedestal tables. Yet the object called a "tetable" is not a prayer stool and it is perhaps not a pedestal table either, even though the tripping of the first syllable describes very precisely the noise of the feet of a pedestal table—their knocking or scratching—when you pull it across the floor to change its place. Here I see Des Grieux in a short black soutane, silk stockings, shoes with buckles and an abbot's white bands, his two hands resting on the back of his prayer stool, his eyes slightly raised—as though he is looking piously toward the vault of the church—and I listen to the word "tetable," peremptory in the air of the room where the real table rests balanced on its four feet, the table that Des Grieux, in the Saint-Sulpice seminary, must be dreaming of, as of his only authentic tabernacle. I listen to this word, "tetable," but I know very well I won't find any solution; it will remain a "tetable," neither a pedestal table nor a prayer stool, and it won't be given a definite form, either by the fact that this object is the central piece of furniture in that room, which it seems to sum up entirely, or by the fact that the word that evokes this object and the object itself can be transported—simply by a man's memory—to another point in space: to a church at Saint-Sulpice, near a prayer stool, surrounded by organ sounds. Does the word "tetable," then, derive its magic from the fact that, although it partakes of the table and resonates like the wood of the prayer stool as it is moved, grating across the flagstones, it designates nothing, even though it seems to signify something, and remains a label

**étable* = "stable," *retable* = "altarpiece," *potable* = "drinkable" and *non potable* ="not drinkable."

applied to pure nothingness or to an object forever incomprehensible? It is probable that some element of thing-in-itself trails after these words, which seem to correspond to a precise reality but are actually without any kind of meaning. Hence their *revelatory* air, since they are by definition formulas for what is most unformable, names for the extraordinary creatures that populate a world beyond our laws.

This sensation, produced by a mere word, of the untimely existence of an object – one that remains undefined but is no less an almost palpable thing, vocabulary being so full of authority – this irritating sensation (like the search for a memory which at moments you think you're about to grasp but which keeps eluding you) is perhaps not so very different, despite its futility, from what people feel who persist in an eager, if faithless, quest of the absolute.

I often used to have dreams whose details I couldn't remember. They were like objects of which I knew only the angles, in their most abstract form – their measurement in degrees. One of these angles would appear in my memory, but despite my efforts, it would remain bare, it would not assume any substance; I perceived only its sharpness, it was like the elbow of a passerby poking me in the ribs without my having had the time or the opportunity to catch a glimpse of the stranger before he lost himself in the crowd. Trying to revive the dream, to make it take on mass and color, to lift it from the flat and dead geometry which, in its disloyal way, was all it amounted to; injecting into it, as a breath of new life, the very vague atmosphere which was all I had left of what had been essential to it; wearing down the fragments of setting, characters, and events that my memory, with some effort, managed to summon up here and there, for a moment; feeling them dissolve even before I had a chance to readjust them; resuming this work an indefinite number of times and under conditions that were worse each time (because the atmosphere dissolved little by little, or became tainted, and the fragments themselves, having been worn down, dwindled away or were falsified, and soon, what I would have seen take shape in my head, if I had gone on any longer, would have been a completely fabricated dream, and one that also had no tangible content); thinking of that in bed before getting up, or in my bath (where I have always liked to daydream), outdoors, at work, at the table; chewing all this over again without having the courage to spit it out before my certainty of not accomplishing anything was evidenced by an almost physical feeling of nausea: this was how, because of such dreams, I sometimes spent an entire day.

In the present moment I find myself in the same sort of state, as I try to bring back to life, under the tip of my pen, what is really no more than a set of needle points; I mean this rather particular layer of memories which I am trying to prospect here. Very sharp needles whose steel glimmers will fascinate me more especially the finer their points are, and which

will be better suited for perforating, the more impalpable they are. Or less cruel needles of which I would only ask that they draw music from the almost imperceptible grooves that are engraved on my heart and whose brief transformation into melody would be the only thing capable of briefly saving me.

Likewise, if I try to give substance to this present moment—to this very *presence*—it immediately hides, becomes indistinct; and everything I say about it, not being able—with good reason!—to address it directly (whereas I would like to cry out to it . . .), all I invent to bring it to reality—or make it return to reality—becomes the most futile chitchat: I line up sentences, I collect words and figures of speech, but what gets caught in each of these traps is always the shadow and not the prey. Whether I am hunting the present fugitive instant, or a memory that has crumbled into dust, or those imaginary objects that seem to hide behind false windows of words painted in trompe-l'oeil on the facade of my mind, I am always hunting the same game: that precious thing, the only real thing, that frequently appears in my dreams in the form of a wonderful record of American Negro music that I recall having heard but remember only very confusedly, a record I know is somewhere in my possession but can't manage to find even though I have tried a pile of other records.

Whether it is a memory precisely located in the past, or an old imaginary creation which may, for all I know, be taking shape at this very intant, or a present moment considered and sought out as such: in the end, it hardly matters what goal I decide to set myself. Because when I hunt, my hunt always takes place in the present. It is no doubt the only affecting element in all this, and now that it has become its own object, this tense race is probably what constitutes—both in the clenched gesture of writing and in the relaxed posture of dreaming—this strange series of sonorous vibrations, the vague perception of which fascinates me so.

From *Biffures*, 1948, pp. 9–24.

A LIFE IN BLURBS (LA REGLE DU JEU)

Tr. by Lydia Davis

Biffures [Crossouts]

Measures for nothing, enticements, trial runs—this is the way these *Biffures*, written for the most part during the occupation, appear to me today. As for the historical setting in which this book belongs, one will find only the vaguest and briefest of allusions to it here; events take place off stage and almost nothing comes to distract from his research an author who—faithful to a habit that seems inclined to become an obsession—writes most of all to see more clearly into himself.

A confrontation with memories taken from various periods of my life but especially from my childhood (out of a liking for cosmogony as much as a penchant for sentimentality), this volume is the first of a work centered on facts of language, a work by means of which I propose to define what for me is the "rule of the game," or more pompously: my poetic art and the code of my *savoir-vivre* which I would like to discover combined in a single system, since I can scarcely see the literary use of speech as anything but a means of sharpening one's consciousness in order to be more—and in a better way—alive.

This first rough-planing of a first stock of materials will be followed by a second volume, more difficult and more ambitious. It will be, in fact, through the future pages of those *Fourbis* [Leavings] that in the light of other experiences I will try to arrive at a conclusion, hoping to attain this end early enough to put the conclusion into practice before old age shall have crossed me out [*biffé*] of the world or broken me down [*fourbu*] too badly.

[1948]

Fourbis [Leavings]

Eager to formulate (at the close of an investigation based on actual experience) a "savoir-vivre" in which a poetics and an ethics would be combined, here Michel Leiris continues the inventory of memories he began in *Biffures*, the first volume of a work entitled *La Règle du jeu* [The Rule of the Game].

Taming death, taking action in an authentic way, breaking through the circle of the self—these are the main themes of *Fourbis*.

The leader of this game moves about in Paris and its environs, and various places in the South of France, Africa, and the Antilles. We see him on his return from the islands becoming upset by the malaise of our Western civilization, then joining with others attempting to establish a more equitable order, but, in the end, not lessening a certain need of his, one that can't be satisfied with a pragmatism hostile to any sort of abandonment to the gratuitousness of what is, really, pure seduction.

The larger work of which this book, with its title indicating a continuing uncertainty, is a part, is not only an autobiographical essay but the historical account itself of that essay, because the man who is its central figure is determined never to lose sight of the three-fold time of his life passing, the world moving, and the pages being written.

[1955]

Fibrilles [Fibrils]

A brew of actual experiences, *Biffures* was the first volume of a work by means of which the author, concentrating first on a few facts of language, soon thought he would be able to discover the rule by which his game should be played – in other words, a sort of *savoir-vivre* encompassing his poetics and his ethics.

To trim the claws of death, to behave like a man, to break one's own walls – these were the great themes broached in *Fourbis*, the second stage of a quest whose results he would later have to try to elucidate.

Now, with *Fibrilles*, the author sees that his real problem has always been this: how to become entirely a poet, feeling, speaking and acting as one? But it appears to him that this way of existing forms a whole that can't be analyzed, that is governed by no legible rule, and whose attainment can't be guaranteed by any prescription.

After numerous quests, real episodes and dreamed episodes, trips through many countries (including China and the infernal swamps), oscillations between literary commitment and social commitment, here he is back where he started. He only knows that the vital question he asked himself can have no answer . . .

Unless playing such a game – even though he may be badly burned – is, in fact, the answer.

[1966]

Frêle Bruit [Faint Sound]

With *Frêle Bruit* (instead of the too ambitious *Fibules* [Fibulae] which were supposed to recapitulate and conclude) Michel Leiris closes *La Règle du Jeu.*

Some people will find it excessive that an author should devote 35 years to writing a work whose primary purpose is to refine and connect facts drawn from his private life. But this investigator, bent on scrutinizing himself, can allege that for the use of a few others as much as for his own use, he wanted to expose as thoroughly as possible the sample of humanity that he is. And not only because he wanted to do it but also because he believed that in the case in point rational investigation could do no more than drive away some shadows, he has shamelessly allowed poetry to take precedence over logical sequence. At least in this book – constructed almost musically – what therefore combines with close or distant memories, and with either old ideas or ideas that occurred along the way, are more or less deliberate attempts to arrive at moments of transparency by manipulating language taken in itself more than as an instrument of communication.

An aspiration to the marvellous, a desire to commit himself to the struggle against the flagrant injustices of society, a desire for universalism which has led him to have direct contacts with cultures other than his own – these are the colors that seem to be dominant in the game of this writer, who has been induced by his acute awareness of the passage of time to try out many different ways of exorcising the horror with which he was filled very early on by the prospect of his annihilation. A horror aggravated now by the horror which the attacks of age and the growing pressure of things cause him to feel in a concrete way.

[1976]

THE NAKED SWORD
BY EDMOND JABES

Tr. by J. Clifford

Silent sword. Silent nakedness. Every silence has its sword; every nakedness its wound.

Silence of I *in the infinite speech of* I.

In this "moment of truth" death is the judge.

Sentence. The text is nothing but that relentless sentence nothing can escape.

Writer and reader lost in the same vocables.

And now the ground opens, horizons merge.

Language takes the risk.

"So accustomed am I to observing myself, and my taste for this bitter form of contemplation is so maniacal, that there are without any doubt things that escape me, probably some of the most visible things, since perspective is everything and a painting of myself, done from my own perspective, is more than likely to leave in the shadow certain details that, for others, would be the most flagrant," Michel Leiris notes.

Shadow mouth! The sword is suspended in the opening of the abyss. The never said, the unspeakable. Should we struggle with the Nothing? We cannot fight absence. And yet, the combat is within, in the folds of emptiness: fold against fold, hollow over hollow.

Is emptiness the never said? The imperceptible fold, the unspeakable? Thin, parallel lines limpidly prolong you.

We let ourselves be borne on nothing, towed by Nothingness. A passage through words, through waters, but without concerning them, stirring in them only a relative interest.

To speak for yourself, with yourself. To tell, tell yourself. An uncontrolled force suddenly heaving up the flat sea.

Questions and replies, don't they arise from the senseless desire to know yourself, from an implacable will to tear down the surrounding walls hoping at last to reach the end of the silence—as if you could fill the abyss with your voice alone?

"As long as we've been in dialogue . . ." writes Hölderlin.

A line taken up by Hegel for meditation and comment:

"In the present case—he affirms—man, to be truly, really man, *and to know himself as such, must impose on others the idea he has of himself; he must get recognition from others (and in the ideal, limiting case, from all the others)."*

So the other is the mirror, the judge, the sentence, the sword.
Can there be no refuge for speech? It's fully itself only when exposed.
It takes its measure only when facing the speech of the other it defies.

So is writing for yourself writing? Speaking for yourself, speech? Indeed, nothing is alone with itself—and speaking to yourself can only, in the end, mean innocently multiplying the story of your life and of your death; starting over from zero to take up again, in its smallest details, the same story intending each time another self; a means, in sum, to enumerate, to recount one's selves.
Isn't the book always opened by the curiosity of an unknown reader?
To make public this dialogue is to assume, in its totality, the risk inherent in all writing, in all speech.

We have been read, we have been heard. We can no longer escape judgement. Whatever the sentence, from now on it's our way of becoming conscious of ourselves.
The weight of our words is never only that of their share in a universe.

So the text is still without object, the word without echo, in the time of their withdrawal. While on the opposite sunny shore the future plays.
The sea engulfs all sounds, all appeals, all cries not able to get across. And to the foreign shore's anonymous companion falls the solemn privilege of abolishing the distance the book maintains with itself; for it does not take refuge outside its vocables but within them, hiding itself in their own greatest depths. So that the book constantly leads to an undiscovered book.

Truth—what we take for truth—and thought are the fruit not of a coupling, but on the contrary emerge only from a harsh confrontation with a truth and thought that are ambitious, arrogant, hostile in their perpetual movement—dizzy from only being perceived in the light of their instantaneous, imperceptible displacements.

Without the fear of inevitable defiance, the cruel and decisive confrontation with the other, *wouldn't autobiography, despite its author's instinctive reserves, quickly turn itself into a banal operation of self complacency?*

We always stumble against the other. *Perhaps madness is only a deaf, obstinate elimination of the other in the name of singular speech, freed from the world and from people.*
Speech is double. It experiences itself in the heart of this duality.

All texts and discourses testify to the final triumph of the other. *It*

will always dominate us; and we write, probably, to escape this painful dominion. From such a perspective one might think of writing as a liberating act; but the writer is freed only to be better subjected.

There is thus no term, no falling due, without the other. *We collapse at its feet each time, powerless to go further with an enterprise that is beyond us, unable to maintain any longer a thought and speech too vast for harmonious completion or universal fulfillment, a thought and speech that are never anything but painful incompletion and the painful unfulfillment of every work.*

No departure if there can be no arrival. Neither a time anticipated nor an unforseeable duration, the route abolished.

Only in time can we be read. The time of writing is only an outside-of-time that time makes legible through integration.

From this perspective isn't the intimate journal, inclined to evade time precisely in the outside-of-time of a protected speech, the supreme attempt to escape the other*?*

And how define its limits when they are never anything but those of a power folded back on itself?

The vocable, in itself, only a hole.

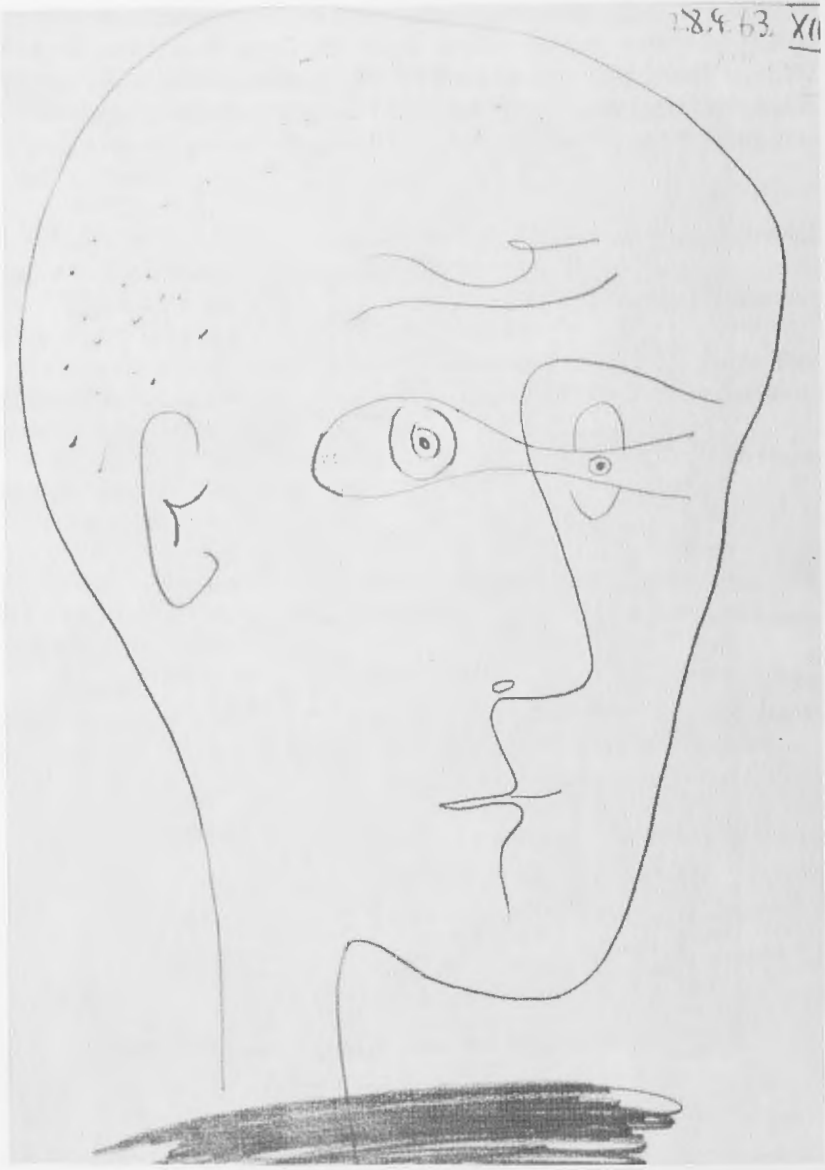
A true dialogue is one that unfolds in broad daylight: dialogue with the vocable, with its likeness. Autobiography as seen by Michel Leiris draws substance from this dialogue, perpetuates it.

Here a man questions himself in the infinite outskirts of a silence where life and death take on their full meaning. Trickery is the play of shadows, a clandestine commerce. We are born and die in the noonday sun.

"L'Epée nue," from L'Ire des Vents, *Spring 1981, pp. 160–165.*

PORTRAITS

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI: **PORTRAIT DE MICHEL LEIRIS III**



PABLO PICASSO: **PORTRAIT DE MICHEL LEIRIS II**

FRANCIS BACON: **STUDY FOR PORTRAIT (MICHEL LEIRIS)**

ANDRE MASSON: **JOUEUR DES DES (PORTRAIT DE MICHEL LEIRIS)**

SECTION 5 CULTURES

CIVILIZATION (1929)

Tr. by Lydia Davis

However little taste one might have for proposing metaphors as explanations, civilization may be compared without too much inexactness to the thin greenish layer—the living magma and the odd detritus—that forms on the surface of calm water and sometimes solidifies into a crust, until an eddy comes to break it up. All our moral practices and our polite customs, that radiantly colored cloak that hides the coarseness of our dangerous instincts, all those lovely forms of culture we are so proud of—since it is thanks to them that we can call ourselves "civilized"—are ready to disappear at the slightest turbulence, to shatter at the slightest impact (like the thin mirror on a fingernail whose polish cracks or roughens), allowing our horrifying *primitiveness* to appear in the interstices, revealed by the fissures just as hell might be revealed by earthquakes, when these cosmic revolutions burst the fragile skin of the earth's circumference and for a moment lay bare the fire at the center, whose wicked and violent heat keeps even the stones molten. Not a day goes by that we don't notice some premonitory sign of such a catastrophe, so that we can truly say, not that we are dancing or standing on a volcano, but that our whole life, our very breathing, is in touch with lava flows, craters, geysers, and everything else to do with volcanoes, and that as a consequence, if we hold up to it a mirror with suitably thick silvering and with a sufficiently sensitive surface, it must be capable of painting long sulfur-colored lines on it.

A woman's fingernail, as red and as pointed as a ruby dagger (amazing that the blood has remained in the middle and not run to the tip), and the wounds cut into precious stones by keen, hard tools that murder the mineral and reduce it to a constellation of angles in turn murderous, a bodily attitude that abruptly relaxes, a fleeting gesture as touching as the sudden swell of a sail on a rising sea—these are precious signs that help us understand how close we are to savages, our various finery of dark or bright cloth being in no way different from skin and feather costumes above tattoos depicting mysterious adventures on the body, like the writing of the stars, which forecasts human events in the air . . .

We're tired of all too insipid shows that aren't inflated by any potential or actual revolt against sacred "politeness," the politeness of the arts, which we call "taste," the politeness of the brain, which we call "intelligence," the politeness of life, which we designate by this word, with its dusty smell, like the bottom of an old bureau drawer: "morality." It would be wrong to characterize us as *blasé*, but the fact is that we're sick of plots that are always the same, derived from our living habits, which are more and more discredited every day, and it isn't enough for us to act in a way that might be equivalent, for example, to the behavior of certain savages who think the best possible use for a telegraph pole is to turn it into a poison arrow (because isn't that more or less what we're doing when we take a mask or a statue that was made for complicated, precise ritual purposes and turn it into a vulgar art object—an infinitely more deadly insult than that paid to European inventions by the savages I just mentioned, since it attacks a fateful, serious mystical theology, rather than mere telegraphy, which is the fruit of a science that can't be scorned too much?). We've had enough of all that, which is why we would so much like to get closer to our primitive ancestry, why we have so little esteem left for anything that doesn't wipe out the succession of centuries in one stroke and put us, stripped of everything, naked, in a more immediate and newer world.

Over the last few years we have seen many signs of this rebellion in literature and painting, we have seen them in all the arts, but in theater there have been very few so far capable of giving us such distinct satisfaction as the following notice, which appears on the program of a show everyone will recognize as soon as they read it, and which is intended as an explanation of one scene in a revue:

PORGY

The subject of the scene is as follows:

"In the Southern States, the land is at sea level and when a Negro dies, if he is not rich enough to be buried in the mountains, he is buried in the swamps, where his body floats to the surface again. When a Negro dies and he is poor, all the other Negroes in the village gather around his coffin and with their singing create a sort of hysteria that induces the men to steal and the women to sell themselves to white men, to raise enough money to bury the dead man. The scene takes place in a barn."

Pedants tend to be disdainful about everything to do with American Negro jazz and art, seeing the current taste for these works as nothing more than a fashion, a passing infatuation with certain exotic forms similar to an earlier infatuation with Hungarian gypsies—in short, a simple matter of wanting to keep up with the latest trend. Others are more sentimental, drip with romanticism, can talk about nothing but slavery, nostalgia, primitive violence, pathetic Garden of Eden stammerings, or the melan-

choly of big cities, which are like vast sugarcane plantations with their stands of pipes and chimneys. Now that we have seen the *Black Birds* revue, we have to put an end to all this nonsense.

What is beautiful about such art is not its exotic aspect, nor what it contains that is highly modern (this modernism is pure coincidence), but primarily the fact that it doesn't really constitute an Art. In fact it seems quite absurd to take such bright, spontaneous productions and stick them with this awful capitalized word which we should only write using a pen full of spiderwebs. Obviously, jazz and whatever derives from jazz have their own rules and their own logic, but that doesn't mean we can talk about "Art," about Great Art, as though we were talking about a particular work by someone who knew he was (or thought he was) inspired . . . Shows like the *Black Birds* revue take us back to a point very far this side of art, to a point of human development at which that bastard conception, issue of the illegitimate loves of magic and free play, has not yet been hypertrophied.

Furthermore, all this is as remote as it could be from gypsy sentimentality. Negro music does not sing about "the eternal regrets that stab our hearts," as they say; what we can say about it is just the opposite, that as we listen to it we feel a terrible regret, the regret that we are so painfully incapable of this sort of simple and beautiful expression, the regret that we are so mediocre, living such a mediocre life, that we are so dull and ugly compared to these creatures, who are as touching as trees.

And so this music and this dancing doesn't stop at our skin but puts down deep, organic roots in us, roots whose thousand ramifications penetrate us, and though this surgery is painful, it gives us stronger blood.

Yet what we may feel sorry about in such shows is the fact that, however powerfully they move us, they still don't completely manage to overcome our spinelessness and create a hysteria as enormous as the hysteria described in the "Porgy" account, a hysteria so intense that it would be capable of immediately driving the audience to commit sordid acts or indulge in extravagant debauches. For this reason, the sculptor Giacometti seemed entirely correct when he said one day that he thought the only possible theater piece would be the following: the curtain rises, a fireman comes on stage and shouts Fire!, the curtain falls, everyone panics, and the theater empties in wild disorder.

Perhaps circus acts like the unforgettable scene in the Gleich Circus, when a whole crowd of acrobats performed far above us, go a little farther than other spectacles, because something real is happening here, and because here, just as on the spot where a murder has been committed or in the vicinity of a slaughterhouse, we breathe in the disgusting odor of death, suspending the threat of danger above our passive spectators' heads. We're not really very far away from the stone age, and the thick blood of the ancient mammoths killed by our grandfathers often rushes to our

heads again in billows of dark malice.

This viewpoint is borne out by the following passage taken from the *Journal* of August 15, 1929:

The Zoological Gardens

> Mlle Claryse (Diavolina), the new attraction in the Zoological Gardens' free circus, will make her debut today, August 15, at 4 p.m. Her leap from one springboard to another will be 8 meters long and 4 meters high.
>
> Diavolina will perform her leap of death again at 10 p.m. She has been engaged by the Gardens until the end of August, *so that all of Paris will be able to admire this beautiful young woman as she risks her life in each of the performances of the free circus,* which take place very day at 4 p.m. and 10 p.m.

And so we enjoy seeing other people take risks while we sit comfortably back in our chairs and give ourselves up to the maddening exhilaration of danger, while never actually exposing ourselves to the slightest hazard and quite capable of shedding our flesh forever, enamored of our lazy tranquillity. This is perhaps the only difference that exists between our period and the period of the cavemen: today we hire a number of scapegoats to take it upon themselves to perform for us everything we wouldn't be brave enough to perform ourselves. This is the very reason, I think, why murderers are so popular: a good crime is no doubt horrible, but at the same time it unconsciously satisfies everyone, and the murderer becomes a kind of sorcerer who has ritually performed the most terrifying of sacrifices.

The time we are living in, the second quarter of the twentieth century, clearly fails to live up to the hopes of the naive optimists. There really is great boredom, despite these few glimmers of madness. The worst misfortune is that even though we live surrounded by magic, we are no longer openly mystical enough to be entitled, each and every day, to sign a pact with the devil!

"Civilisation," from *Documents*, 1929; *Brisées*, pp. 26–31.

Pour le texte original © Mercure de France 1966.

JAZZ

Interview edited and translated by Michael Haggerty

Leiris in L'Age d'homme *[*Manhood, *p. 109, tr. by R. Howard]: "In the period of great license that followed the hostilities [of 1914–18], jazz was a sign of allegiance, an orgiastic tribute to the colors of the moment. It functioned magically, and its means of influence can be compared to a kind of possession. It was the element that gave these celebrations their true meaning: a* religious *meaning, with communion by dance, latent or manifest eroticism, and drinks, the most effective means of bridging the gap that separates individuals from each other at any kind of gathering. Swept along by violent bursts of topical energy, jazz still had enough of a "dying civilization" about it, of humanity blindly submitting to The Machine, to express quite completely the state of mind of at least some of that generation: a more or less conscious demoralization born of the war, a naive fascination with the comfort and the latest inventions of progress, a predilection for a contemporary setting whose insanity we nonetheless vaguely anticipated, an abandonment to the animal joy of experiencing the influence of a modern rhythm, an underlying aspiration to a new life in which more room would be made for the impassioned frankness we inarticulately longed for. In jazz, too, came the first public appearances of* Negroes, *the manifestation and the myth of black Edens which were to lead me to Africa and, beyond Africa, to ethnography."*

September 2, 1982

Michael Haggerty: I thought we might begin, if you'd like, by evoking your first encounter with jazz.

Michel Leiris: Yes, my first encounter with jazz goes back to 1918, before the war was over. At that time I used to go to a *music-hall* called Le Théâtre Caumartin where a black American jazz band, The Seven Spades, would play during the intermissions. They weren't the featured attraction; they weren't really on the bill, but they provided the entertainment during intermissions for the revue performing at the Théâtre Caumartin. There is a historical footnote which might interest you: I recall very clearly that one of the members of the orchestra (which, as their name indicates, consisted of seven musicians), was Vance Lowry who later stayed in Paris and played at the *Boeuf sur le Toit.* He became a Pari-

sian personality. He was one of the first black American jazzmen to come to France.

M.H. At that time was he playing banjo or saxophone?

M.L. Usually he played the banjo but I do recall occasionally hearing him play the saxophone. . . . I don't know if he died in Paris but I know he stayed here for many years.

M.H. During that same period Louis Mitchell's Jazz Kings were also performing in Paris.

M.L. After the Seven Spades, I heard a number of different jazz bands. I always liked jazz a great deal but I never was what one could call a connoisseur. I liked it, that's all.

M.H. But you evoked jazz in a very beautiful passage in *L'Age d'homme*. In that text you link it to dancing. The period immediately following the war was one when dancing was at the height of its popularity in France.

M.L. Yes, but to be truthful, during the shows at the Théâtre Caumartin, the public did not dance. It was purely musical. It was jazz. Except perhaps in clandestine night clubs, people didn't dance during the war. It wouldn't have been possible to do more than present a little jazz during intermissions without provoking a scandal or risking a ban. But after the war, with the vogue for *les surprises-parties*, I can say that, like most of the young people of my generation, I went dancing a great deal. We formed a small band of friends who went to the dance halls almost every night.

M.H. Was one of those places Le Bal Nègre, rue Blomet?

M.L. No, these were snobbish, high society places. Le Bal Nègre was much later. I can't give you an exact date but I think that Robert Desnos must have been one of the first to frequent Le Bal Nègre. In any case we didn't go there to dance. We went there to bask in the exotic ambiance, to listen to West Indian music and to watch the others dance.

M.H. Was its exoticism at least in part responsible for the fascination with jazz at this time?

M.L. Absolutely, exoticism played a part in it, without a doubt. People have often asked me about how I became an ethnologist and a specialist on Africa after the trip I made across Africa from Dakar to Djibouti with the Griaule Mission [1931–1933]. Since I am involved with a gallery of modern art many people believe that it was simply African art which led me to become an *Africaniste*. I agree that *l'art nègre* is largely responsible, but my true discovery of *nègrisme* was made when I discovered jazz. Jazz

was my first contact with what was called—what is still called—Negritude.

M.H. In *L'Age d'homme* you suggest that it was jazz which would "lead me to Africa and, beyond Africa to ethnography."

M.L. It's possible that I said that jazz brought me to ethnography, but that would be saying a lot. What is certain is that I enjoyed jazz as something exotic and non-European, as an affront to European music and art. What also encouragd me to become an ethnographer was the desire to know non-European civilizations out of disgust with European civilization.

M.H. At that time jazz was for you, and perhaps also for Georges Bataille, *la rencontre avec l'Autre* [the encounter with the Other].

M.L. I think that's correct. As far as I can remember Bataille was never especially interested in jazz, but in 1929 when Georges-Henri Rivière introduced us to the famous revue, *The Black Birds*, Bataille also became an enthusiast of that show.

M.H. Did you see Josephine Baker when she came to Paris with La Revue Nègre?

M.L. Yes, in 1925. I was enchanted by La Revue Nègre. It has often been said that in La Revue Nègre performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in 1925, Josephine Baker danced with a belt of bananas. I don't believe it. Perhaps my memory is failing me but I believe that she did not begin wearing the banana belt until several months or even a year later when she appeared at Les Folies Bergères. It was during that engagement that the banana belt appeared. At the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées she was of course very slightly clad but there wasn't that kind of exoticism of the virgin forest that the banana belt suggested. Even though the banana is a cultivated fruit. . . .

M.H. Do you recall an erotic dance she performed with another dancer?

M.L. No, I don't remember that. I recall that in the 1925 production her principal partner was Louis Douglas. The show was charged with eroticism and yet remained very discreet.

M.H. I'd like to return for a moment to the idea of *la rencontre avec l'Autre*.

M.L. During my career as an ethnographer, first as a specialist on Africa and later on the West Indies, I have always been attracted to the Other who is not totally Other, the Other who appears *chez vous*. What I find fascinating in jazz is the Africanization of European music. In the same way, what has always interested me in the West Indies is the extraordinary mixtures. In West Indian culture

one finds African strains but they're entwined with French provincialism and many other things. Blends have always interested me; cross breeding has always seduced me.

M.H. Along with this encounter with the Other, there also was a rediscovery of the body – with Josephine Baker?

M.L. Absolutely.

M.H. Was it important that it be a black body, *un corps autre*?

M.L. Actually it was a very light body. Josephine Baker was a very light-skinned mulatto. According to accepted beliefs she was a Negro but she was not black at all, a little tanned that's all . . . It's possible that her light skin was responsible for her powerful attraction to the French public. For example, a pure blooded, truly black, Negro woman probably would not have been acceptable. She was perfect because she was just slightly colored . . . Now it's my turn. Since you are asking me questions, would you allow me to ask you one?

M.H. Of course.

M.L. I have a cherished memory from my childhood. When I was very small I recall seeing the famous Chocolat, I believe at the Nouveau Cirque. Chocolat, whose portrait Toulouse-Lautrec painted, was usually the stage partner of . . .

M.H. . . . Footit.

M.L. Yes, Footit and Chocolat. Was Chocolat a member of the Joyeux Nègres in Paris in 1902 that you mention in your Chronology?

M.H. Perhaps, but I'm not really sure. It was at that time that the fad for the cakewalk was launched in Europe.

M.L. The cakewalk was the classic dance, so to speak.

M.H. As Georges-Henri Rivière has demonstrated, the cakewalk was derived from the English contra dance. In much the same way that Black Americans had creatively deformed European music they changed the British contra dance into their own step, the cakewalk . . . Another aspect that you and Georges-Henri Rivière have underscored is the relation between jazz and the sacred. The Belgian poet Robert Goffin in one of his poems published in 1922 called jazz "the most beautiful *Te Deum* in the world." In *L'Age d'homme* you claim that these "fêtes" after the war had a religious significance. In your provocative review for *Documents* of some of Duke Ellington's records you write: "At present jazz represents the true sacred music, in other words the music most capable of putting a crowd into a state of trance, which is almost like saying it is the only music."

M.L. Yes, although I won't disclaim it, when I see that statement now, I must admit that I was a little bit carried away. "The only music," no, it didn't take very long for me to abandon that idea. In any case there is the reservation, "almost like saying it is the only music" which means that I wasn't carrying it to such an extreme . . . What I write in that text is based on the idea of trance I had at the time. It was probably a simplistic view of the sacred but, for me the sacred *par excellence* was whatever was capable of evoking a trance-like state. At that time what was the music most capable of provoking a trance? Jazz. Hence, jazz was the true sacred music. Obviously there is a taste for paradox and a sense of provocation . . . Another striking aspect is mentioned by André Schaeffner in his book on jazz [published in 1926] which I barely remember. Jazz was not just a musical performance, it was also a visual show. Drummers would juggle their sticks. There was a kind of protocol: soloists would stand up, they would hold their instruments in a spectacular way. There were many aspects of the performance which weren't essential to the music, but were there for the show. It was almost a cross between a concert and a ballet, almost like a total work of art or music which overtly included gestures.

M.H. In an article on Albert Giacometti . . .

M.L. Giacometti, yes, there is an allusion to the *Black Birds* in the article on Giacometti.

M.H. You evoke the idea of crisis. You speak of certain very powerful moments and one of those moments is the appearance of a black woman . . .

M.L. Yes, a girl from the *Black Birds* with a huge bouquet of roses . . .

M.H. . . . damp roses, on a street in Montmartre . . .

M.L. Well, she was very black. She wasn't at all like Josephine Baker. This black girl, pretty, smiling, apparently happy, carrying a large bouquet of roses—this was a marvellous apparition.

M.H. The *Black Birds* revue seems to me the one which had the most impact on you?

M.L. Yes, I think that's true. From the point of view of artistic quality, I think the *Black Birds* revue was far superior to the Revue Nègre with Josephine Baker. In fact the two aren't really comparable.

M.H. During that same period did you go to the jazz nightclubs around Pigalle and Montmartre?

M.L. Yes, of course. I didn't go there systematically every evening but I used to go to them quite frequently. The one I was at most often

was called Le Grand Duc. The proprietor was an American colored woman, nicknamed Bricktop. You have certainly heard of her. She was a fascinating person, truly an astonishing individual. She must be at least ninety years old now.

M.H. Do you recall any of the orchestras that played in the clubs?

M.L. At Bricktop's the show simply consisted of a set of her songs and during a certain period of time there was another singer, much younger than Bricktop, named Virginia West, who would also sing. That was all the organized entertainment they had. But what was marvelous was that at about 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, when the musicians had finished their work in the different clubs they would come to Bricktop's to have supper and to play music for their own enjoyment. That was wonderful.

M.H. Just after the Second World War Sartre dedicated *La Putaine Respectueuse* to you. The play treats the racial situation in the South of the United States. More recently you published a pamphlet on racism commissioned by Alfred Métraux. Is there any link between this problem and your interest in jazz?

M.L. I have never in my life been racist but my reasoned and militant antiracist stance is something I adopted later. Spontaneously I felt an attraction toward Blacks and was immediately biased favorably toward them. I realize now that it was a kind of reverse racism, because Blacks are no more *sympathiques* than any other group. Like with any group of people there are wonderful individuals and difficult individuals. I was extremely naive to believe that Blacks were innocence personified. (Laughs). I never republished or anthologized a review of King Vidor's film *Hallelujah* published in *La Revue du Cinéma,* because I was embarrassed by it. I realized many years later that this was a thoroughly racist article, based on all the stereotypes of Blacks: "the sensual Black," "the illogical Black," etc. I was simply taking these stereotypes and presenting them in a positive light rather than giving them their usual negative connotation. That's the reason I never republished this article.

M.H. Do you recall any of your contemporaries, say Philippe Soupault or Robert Desnos, writing about jazz?

M.L. I believe that Soupault did but I can't recall anything by Desnos. Desnos was especially involved with Le Bal Nègre. He particularly liked South American and Cuban music. He even wrote a preface to Alejo Carpentier's article on Cuban music published in *Documents.* I remember listening to records of the Portuguese fado at his house. He loved that and perhaps also flamenco music, but I am not sure. I like flamenco a great deal, but not as much as

jazz. The flamenco is very beautiful but it has remained a folk music. What I find so striking about jazz is that it began as a truly folkloric music and then had the incredible development we all know. I think that must be a unique occurrence.

M.H. Have you followed the developments in jazz since the twenties?

M.L. Somewhat. I was never a true aficionado, never someone who is up on everything or who rushes out to hear the latest musician. I was never like that. But I do recall the indignation I felt over the attacks against Cab Calloway by people like Hugues Panassie. Panassie was an impossible pedant and a sectarian critic who talked about jazz in a very solemn manner. It was absurd. He was more tedious than most classical music critics who speak in terms of "the sublime." In any case critics like Hugues Panassie railed against Cab Calloway, calling his music commercial jazz. I don't believe that I have ever seen anyone captivate their audience the way Cab Calloway did. I have never seen anyone who was able to put an entire hall full of people in a state verging on trance the way Cab Calloway did at La Salle Pleyel. Perhaps it was in part his scat singing that created such a powerful effect on his audience. I adore scat singing. It has a dizzying, giddy effect on you . . . Of course I saw Ellington and Armstrong at the Salle Pleyel. Count Basie is also someone I like very much, because his music is very discrete, just a few notes on the piano. My family and I are very close to Count Basie's impresario, Norman Granz. Every time that Granz organizes a concert in Paris we attend. So we've heard Count Basie and Ella Fitzgerald many times.

M.H. After World War II did you go to the nightclubs around Saint-Germain-des-près?

M.L. Of course. I heard Claude Luter and perhaps Boris Vian playing pocket trumpet. I used to go to Saint-Germain-des-près occasionally, never as often as Sartre or Queneau.

M.H. The bands at that time were playing dixieland or New Orleans style?

M.L. Exactly, they were playing New Orleans style and that's what I didn't enjoy. I felt that there was very little interest in limiting yourself to a historical recreation of jazz during its golden age in New Orleans, the way Claude Luter did . . . To be truthful, I enjoyed much more the music that Wiener and Doucet performed at Le Boeuf sur Le Toit. Of course it wasn't really jazz; it was "inspired by " jazz. Wiener and Doucet did something that Luter never did. They invented a style of Parisian jazz which was pretty and original.

M.H. Did you see Dizzy Gillespie's Big Band at the Salle Pleyel?

M.L. Dizzy Gillespie's orchestra was one of the big bands that impressed me most. He seemed to have brought about considerable stylistic innovations. At the time it seemed to be very exotic music. It was unsettling. We seemed to be carried away.

M.H. Are there other jazz musicians that you like?

M.L. Among the more recent musicians there is someone whom I have always liked a great deal, that's Archie Shepp. One of the most extraordinary things that I have ever seen or heard was a concert in Algiers in 1969. There was a congress for African unity and Archie Shepp came, but as usual he was very unreliable, very eccentric. He made all of us wait for the longest time. Each time his concert was scheduled it would be postponed and each time we would be disappointed. Finally one evening in a movie theater in Algiers, Archie Shepp showed up with three musicians and Ted Joans, the poet and former Black Panther who spends much of his time in Africa and who stops by to see me when he is in Paris. There was an enormous collective improvisation. Along with Archie Shepp and his musicians, Ted Joans recited a poem, and there were musicians and singers from just about every region of Algeria. It was a fabulous kind of happening. They managed to keep all of this together. Of course it was kind of *cacophonique* but nowadays we're somewhat accustomed to dissonances. It was absolutely fantastic, one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen or heard.

THE CARIBBEAN TURN

In L'Intention poétique *Edouard Glissant, the Martinican poet, novelist and essayist, underlines the importance of Leiris's post-war research in Haiti and the French Antilles. "Leiris's effort will consist in moving ethnographic practice toward the study of real contacts: in this perspective he reconciles the search for self and the search for the other, positing their interrelation once they have been clearly separated. He will work out in the domain of reality that dialectic formerly de-formed (in the imaginary) by his first books. Two visits to the Antilles confirm his intention to sound out there the contacts of civilizations. These countries offer a*

privileged example of cultural symbiosis. Leiris will be convinced by this complexity tending toward a harmony evolving, as it were, under the observer's very eyes. No ethnography of the Antilles can be strictly recapitulative; it must involve a future in the present, force consideration of the clash of cultures, and confirm (despite the rampant racism in these lands) that it is not utopian to think of the arrival, one day, of a true composite civilization." (1969, Editions du Seuil, p. 133)

In another work, Glissant offers an example of a process of cultural troping, "de-formation," reminiscent of Leiris's early "Glossary." From Le discours antillais *(Paris: Le Seuil, 1981, pp. 279–280):*

Creolization
by Edouard Glissant

Tr. by J. Clifford

Advice printed on a flag and distributed by the office of highway safety: NE ROULEZ PAS TROP PRÈS [Don't Tailgate]. According to statistics (watch out for statistics) about 20% of motorists in Martinique have mounted this flag on the rear window of their automobiles, a flag given out in garages when customers pick up their cars. About 20% of this group, using scissors if needed, transform the sentence "NE ROULEZ PAS TROP PRÈS," creolizing it.

What's interesting is the number and meaning of the variants in the writing of this sentence, their relationship. Note that the motorists are working with a given reference material, the French sentence, and thus variations are extremely significant. Here are some: (1) "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÈS." I may point out that in Martinican Creole it should be permissible to write: "PA ROULE TRO PRE." Dropping the s *from "pas," the* z *from "roulez," the* p *from "trop," and the* s *from "pres" is of great importance not only for the problem of phonetic writing but also for the structure of Creole itself. We find therefore a certain number of examples, ten from a total of twenty-five, using "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÈS." We find also: (2) "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÉ"; (3) "PAS ROULÉ TROP PRES"; (4) "PAS ROULÉ TROP PRÉ"; (5) "ROULEZ PAS TROP PRÈS." This last form is very Creole (it affirms and recommends the action before correcting it with a negative limitation), a manipulation of the sentence much more significant than the simple fact of crossed out letters.*

There are also some real productions. That is to say, individuals may cut up one or several original flags and playfully extract combinations.

So we find: (6) "OU TROP PRÉ"—no longer a piece of advice but a repressive declaration. I've noticed: (7) "PAS OULE TRO PRE," where the r *of "roulez" has vanished. I will take up this formula later. We find, finally: (8) "ROULEZ," which contradicts the original admonition. And one inscription even enjoins: (9) "ROULEZ PAPA!"*

A valuable example of counter-poetics. It should be observed first that we're dealing not with deprived peasants but with people who have cars. Thus in evaluating these variants we cannot chalk them up to a lack of "training." Second, Creole rightly appears as a cutting up of French. Third, a cultural will to resistance is manifested here, if not against the established order at least against an order given. Fourth, the variety of formulas is very marked, though there is a much greater frequency of the expression "PAS ROULEZ TROP PRÈS," with no alteration of French orthography. The formulation "PA OULE TRO PRE" intrigued me. Seen at the exit of a supermarket: a mixed couple, actually a young, newly arrived French man married to (or living with) a Martinican woman. Because he had been told (or had observed) that Martinicans don't pronounce rs *he cut the flag into "PA OULE TRO PRE." An extremely interesting example of frenchifying, or of disturbance by frenchifying. To think that one should drop the* r *because Martinicans don't pronounce it is an amusing error. Yet militant partisans of Creole have taken the same path; in quite a few cases they remove the* r *replacing it, for example, with a* w. *Thus they write* pawol *for the equivalent of the French word "parole." Even if this* w *seems valuable (nearly all Creole writers give* mwin *for "moin"—*moi*) the* w *introduces an extra reading difficulty that doesn't seem justified.*

Let us review the conclusions of this more than makeshift inquest. We are indeed dealing with a case of counter-poetics: derisive operation; attempt by means of unplanned, unharmonious variations to escape the coercion of the French language; impossibility of finding an orthographic consensus; resistance to an "order" coming from elsewhere; formation of a "counter-order."

AUTHENTICITY

Let us consider a piece of African sculpture such as the famous statue of the god Gou, representing a Dahomey deity of arms and war, which was brought back to France in 1894 after the capture of Abomey. This statue is made entirely of iron and, although it includes many constituents

of European origin (sheet iron from a whaler to form the base, nut and screw to fix the god's head-dress, etc.), it is nevertheless undeniably one of the finest known specimens of African Negro art. It may be thought that, in a work of this sort, which was made prior to the conquest, any European influence exercised on the artist can only have been by way of

Photo credit/Erwin Blumenfeld

MICHEL LEIRIS AND THE GOD GOU—in the Trocadero Ethnography Museum

borrowing. Certain methods (I should almost like to say certain dodges) characteristic of Europe were used deliberately by the artist, without any inducement due to foreign intervention in his ethnic environment. In these circumstances, the motive impulse was in no way altered for the worse, and the resultant production was not an indeterminate hybrid but an object whose mixed composition gives it an added strangeness making it still more solemn and imposing.

When, moreover, we consider how vitally the genius of the Negroes transplanted to the United States of America has found expression in jazz, which was developed in deplorable conditions, when slavery was still scarcely abolished, by individuals who had no other aim in view than self-expression or self-amusement, taking their materials as they found them—Western musical instruments and themes which, in this instance, served in much the same way as the fragment of the whaler, the nut, the screw and similar items in the statue of the god Gou—when we consider that jazz has quite recently branched out along new lines (as we can see in the so-called "be-bop" style, whose firmly modernistic trend contrasts with the old New Orleans style), we may well feel inclined to place great hopes in the artistic future of the Negroes, even if the circumstances of their life come to differ greatly from those in which the styles of sculpture with which we are familiar were developed.

After all the upheavals through which they have passed in the course of their history, at the hands of Islam and the slave-traders, and later under the colonial domination of the European peoples, may not the African Negroes have been so far prevented from showing what they can really do in the fine arts? Whether this is so or not, one can conceive the possibility of a revival of Negro sculpture comparable with what jazz has represented in music. But it is doubtful whether such a revival can be brought about from above, under the concerted impulse of the colonial administrators and by channels which, being artificial, would inevitably have an academic taint. If such a revival does one day come about, we may be sure that it will be on the initiative of the Negroes themselves, as it was for jazz, and that it will take, as jazz did, a form very different from those handed down by tradition and showing very little respect for the suggestions of those Westerners who are so prone to regard themselves as the acknowledged pundits of civilization. Thus, when all is said and done, the possibility of a renaissance of African sculpture seems to lie in an emancipation of the Negroes which, like any form of emancipation, the people concerned must themselves accomplish.

From "African Negroes and the Arts of Carving and Sculpture," in the U.N.E.S.C.O. volume, *Interrelations of Cultures*, 1953, pp. 350–351; translation unattributed.

IN THE MUSEE DE L'HOMME

Tr. by J. Clifford

It might as well be said that a large portion of my time has been spent in a basement; for my office at the Musée de l'Homme – this little room which, although retired, I still use thanks to my status (Anything can happen!) of senior member and honorable ornament of the house – is situated a bit below the Trocadero gardens.

Seated at my table and turning my head to the left, through the metal bars that for reasons of security adorn my window, I can make out the upper portion of the Eiffel Tower, half-hidden by a cluster of disparate trees whose names, despite our long acquaintance, I do not know as (too much the urban type) I hardly know the names of any trees. If the work I do here with all its full and empty moments is a kind of sapper's operation – something I've long believed, thinking that ethnology by giving every culture its due would undermine the foundations of our Western arrogance – then what more perfect site for the job than this den which, like the identical room beside it, opens onto the vaster but quite congested "Department of Black Africa," a gallery which is reached, like its neighboring locales, through a slightly curving corridor shielded from the daylight, artificially illuminated, and dominated at one end by the candle-colored octagon of a clock set to the right of two elevators (always breaking down) and losing itself at the other end in shadows hiding a freight elevator strong enough to hoist heavy burdens or a large number of people in its frequently grinding cell!

People have sometimes told me I should have a better office. Still, it's a fact: I've nearly always liked this place which is very quiet and which I value because it alternates with my domicile, not as a different space but as a location where different ideas are stirred up, for I am as rarely an ethnologist when at home as I am a writer among these four walls of which two on opposite sides contain the door and the window beginning half way to the ceiling above some radiator pipes, and of which only the two walls to the right and left are enlivened by non-functional elements. On one, the wall in front of which I'm generally seated, hangs a mask from Mali endowed with three antelope horns and attached ornaments (shells, gaming tokens, European pocket mirrors) while the bottom is shaped like an inverted arch and consists entirely of wood. On the other wall hangs a nineteenth-century canvas reproducing a Pompeian painting from the Naples museum that depicts a scene from the mysteries of Isis, doubtless a faithful copy in the mind of its author (whose goal was probably only documentary) but done in a pudgy, stereotypic style as outmoded for us as it is aberrant with respect to the original – all endowing this doubly anachronistic work, simultaneously naive and learned, with

a singular charm.

These two objects have not found their way onto my walls as the result of a carefully considered choice. One of them had a sentimental attachment: a mask acquired near the start of my first trip into the field whose descriptive label I filled out myself. As for the other, I saved it from an auto-da-fe, at a moment when they were throwing out old and apparently ridiculous objects from the ex-Trocadero Museum, now the Musée de l'Homme. Still, this pair of objects could serve as a clue to anyone wanting to characterize me as a specialist in one of the disciplines practiced within the institution I still frequent several times a week. One reason the mask charms me, beyond its sentimental value, is that its European borrowings (trade mirrors, tokens) introduce the baroque note of a sort of reverse exoticism while leaving unimpaired its African allure, seeming to show the sculptor's free use of our industrial products rather than an influence he has undergone, a point in favor not of Europe but of an Africa able to ennoble crass commercial objects by connecting them to a wooden carving of impressive simplicity and bringing them, by means of this object, into the orbit of their rituals. Conversely, it's not an unexpected elevation but a passage to the ridiculous (as with "stupid paintings" and pathetic old theatres) that charms me in the dully patinated copy whose most striking details for me are, among other figures, a mostly naked black crowned with leaves and dancing in a sort of small theatre (probably the entrance to a temple) while, kneeling at the foot of the stairs leading up to it, a curvaceous veiled priestess waves a sistrum in the dancer's direction beside an altar around which two large birds are pecking and on which a holocaust is apparently burning. A ridiculous picture and, something deeper, a tongue stuck out at the science of cultures, since if a well-intentioned copyist has been able to transform a fine Roman relic into a model for a bad stage set of *The Magic Flute* this leads one to think it may be the same for all our work as observers of distant societies and that when we feel we have traced a realistic portrait of one of them perhaps we have done nothing but interpret according to our own fashions, providing an image that will seem laughable once these fashions have changed.

The not untroubled pleasure I derive from the mask with three horns and the painting snatched from the flames depends, certainly, on a certain degree of irony. In the former case, it is thanks to what some might consider a debasement (the glaring intrusion of European junk) that I am more subtly moved than if it had the purity of an antique to which nothing untimely had attached its mark. As for the scene of Isis, its power derives not only from the doubt it raises by analogy but also from the strange mix of comic and serious it immediately activates, its innocently parodic air amusing me like a carnival while at the same time making me feel something of the grandeur of the mysteries of Isis through a burlesque that allows me to feel moved without pulling back in fear of losing myself

in a spurious mysticism. Knowing this, would someone analyzing my service records at the Musée de l'Homme need to ask why, in the years when I still travelled professionally, the Caribbean, a confluence of Africa and Europe and a place where quite a few strange cultural hybrids have been produced, became my field of preference—why, too, I got interested in cults whose adepts, in their trances, mimicked the gods in a kind of lived theatre played without even an ideal barrier between actors and spectators each capable in principle of being suddenly visited by a god with the result that an ethnographer, carried along by his taste for the *elsewhere*, but a rationalist as necessary, could be a full participant without abandoning his observer's role or donning another skin, finding himself part of the show like any other accomplice.

To the extent I have been free to choose my fields and themes of ethnographic research, I've leaned toward objects of study seeming to harbor a style of intrinsic irony that suited me. Two cultures seem to intermingle in a fascinating, ambiguous embrace only so that each can inflict on the other a more visible denial; the gods are summoned in epiphanies that take the form of masquerades, such were the things that satisfied my (seldom appeased) need to merge the *yes* and the *no*, to accept only what comes of an incessant putting in question, an attraction less for sublime beauty than for what could be said to vilify itself or for what, apparently weak, is thus all the more poignant unless, inversely, its tragic excess defies taste with so much cynicism and candor that one is thereby almost cheered up—a need that sometimes seems to denote—if it's anything more than an affectation forbidding me all direct enthusiasm—a perverse inclination to find enjoyment only in ambiguity and paradox, and that sometimes seems sanctified by the idea that a marriage of contraries is the highest summit one can metaphysically attain.

Yes and *no*. Two places distinct in their attachments between which I'm usually transported (more fun than boredom) on the number 63 bus: is one a "yes" to the other's "no"? If I'm partial to this alternation between work at home and work at the Musée de l'Homme it may be, in part, as someone hoping to win back on the red square what he lost on the black, and in part too it may be because of the constant irony involved in this coming and going: for I keep my distance in each case, whether from ethnology when I'm practicing literature, or from the latter when I turn to the former, and (according to this schema that on closer examination of my work times, is too theoretical to merit a monolithic *yes*) I change course on schedule always pushing off from one or the other of these occupations—while even the one that has several times summoned me elsewhere is now little more than a cold working over of documents or a brittle learning.

From *Frêle bruit*, 1976, pp. 268–272.

SECTION 6 PRESENCE

LASSO

Tr. by J. Clifford

Like the ribbon at Olympia's throat, the black on white lines I write should always make something present. Yet my difficulty isn't so much that. Rather it's the problem—more general and not just one of expression—of how to catch things that for me are present enough to be communicated, as if a lasso could encircle them in just the right place, making others feel their presence.

Working primarily at the stage of capture, not of binding, the lasso obviously has it over the ribbon.

And doesn't this lasso always have to snare something *wild* (brute, bare, untouched, really stubborn) both outside and inside me?

From *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia*, 1981, p. 203.

FRED ASTAIRE

Tr. by Lydia Davis

Fred Astaire in a black suit and a top hat, Fred Astaire bare-headed in a tuxedo, Fred Astaire in Prince of Wales check and a boater, Fred Astaire in a bowler hat with an umbrella, Fred Astaire in a fedora without gloves, Fred Astaire in a double-breasted suit wearing gloves, Fred Astaire in shirtsleeves, Fred Astaire in a sweater, Fred Astaire in a travel overcoat with a suitcase, Fred Astaire knotting his cravat, Fred Astaire pulling at his suspenders, going into a restaurant, waiting in the rain, juggling with his cigarette lighter, taking a walk in the country, courting a woman, there is a whole gallery of Fred Astaires, we see him at night and in the daytime, in winter and in spring, in comfortable furnished rooms or on the pavement, in convulsions, humming, stretching or jumping, his face consumptive, but his eyes laughing, his smile wide between the tense features of an alcoholic, and with his look of a hare-brained nice guy and that inimitable distinction which only certain regally dressed hooligans can aspire to. "There was some need of our dry air," said Vaché. "A

cemetery for uniforms and liveries," said Marcel Duchamp. And Rimbaud spoke of "the cruel bearing of tawdry finery," while occupying himself with quite other matters and obviously never doubting that one day there would exist this severe jacket that suddenly becomes delirious, these shoes of beautiful quality leather that suddenly go into a trance and strike the floor as though they wanted to defy it or enrage it, this fine silk handkerchief lying over a heart that suddenly begins to bleed, for this store window mannequin, this automaton, this sylph, is also a man, and all his luxury, his multifarious outfit of costly odds and ends, his little idiosyncrasies, will not prevent him from falling in love sometimes, or becoming bored.

One of the most intense aspects of the modern malaise is embodied by Fred Astaire, this marvellous dancer and slightly macabre clown who is so well dressed (whose clothes are just skimpy enough to make him look a little shabby, but at the same time ample enough to make him look like an emaciated starveling and for him to become heartrending, if the song falls apart), and when I saw him dance in London in *The Gay Divorcee* about a year and a half ago, he reminded me irresistibly of the drawings that one of my friends and I used to scribble in our notebooks during the war and that all depicted perfectly elegant skeletons, some civilian, others military – the expression of a very special variety of *frivolity.*

"Fred Astaire," from *La Bête noire,* No. 1, 1935; *Brisées,* pp. 55–56.

Pour le texte original © Mercure de France 1966.

ACTED THEATRE AND LIVED THEATRE IN THE ZAR CULT

Tr. by J. Clifford

What follows are summary passages from Leiris's most developed scholarly account of his research on spirit possession undertaken in 1933 in Ethiopia: La Possession et ses aspects théâtraux chez les Ethiopiens de Gondar, 1958. *(See also the passage from* L'Afrique fantôme *translated in Section 2 above.) The present excerpt omits the frequent illustrative footnotes contained in the book.*

"The ability, above all, to believe every lie." This is the principal gift that the great romantic historian Michelet, toward the end of his study of sorcery in medieval times and the *ancien régime,* can confidently attribute to the sorceress. Now, among the facts of different kinds I was

able to observe while living in close proximity with a *bâla zâr* group, if there were many concerned with possession where the sincerity of the principal participant can hardly be doubted, there are as many others where this sincerity is strongly questionable. A patient like Yasi Araq, afflicted by a synovial discharge, was in great pain each time she performed the *gurri* [a dance that announces the onset of trance] and it is clear that she would not have gesticulated in so painful a way had she not been animated by profound faith in the zâr's power. Another patient of Malkâm Ayyahu, who was probably consumptive and of whose death I learned during the course of my research, also gave herself over to practices (trances, ablutions, etc.) that were certainly made too painful by her condition to allow of any dissemblage on her part. When the *alaqâ* Enqo Bâhrey is terrified to see Malkâm Ayyahu amuse herself pinching people in the style of Azzâj Deho [a zâr spirit], it may all be a harmless game for the healer, but for the initiate at least the fear is not faked, showing that he's quite convinced of the possible harmful results of such mimicry. Inversely, it is hard to believe that Malkâm Ayyahu is being completely sincere when, for example, she is possessed by Sânquit at the exact moment this zâr is supposed to preside over the serving of the beer, having just been reminded by the whisper of a nearby accomplice. And without being able to accuse her of actual trickery (it being understood that a possession state is not necessarily spontaneous but is quite often brought on by ritual needs, with the help of methods like chants, hand clapping, or other evocative procedures) one can still be struck by her consistent success when circumstances require that a certain genie be present in her or in one of her initiates. Even if one excludes actual trickery, it is scarcely conceivable that opportune possessions can be so regularly obtained without a certain complaisance or willingness to play along. And what are we to make of a case like that of Abicu's friend who was ultimately willing to fake the *gurri* characteristic of her friend's zâr in the certitude that by so doing she would successfully appropriate the invoked spirit? As we have already seen, the possessed frequently accuse each other of fraud; for such suspicions to arise so commonly in relations between *bâla-zârs*, that is between people who are far from likely to be skeptics, *a priori*, in this domain, it must be that their suspicions arise either from their personal experiences as participants (aware of their own complaisances) or else from observations they have made in cases where the trickery was so clear that even they were not duped, whatever their respect for what is manifested under the guise of the zâr.

Although lying about zâr matters is frequently denounced, as much by believers as by those who maintain a distance from the cult, it remains true that among the faithful a belief in the authenticity of possessions never seems to be seriously impaired either by the marked cases of deceit observed in others (and even the eventual frauds they may be the first to

recognize in themselves) or by the "complaisance" they know from their own possession experience as they get used to being "taken" on demand, so to speak, by the genie appropriate to the occasion. An initiate like Abieu may declare in a temperamental moment, "If the zâr exists, let's lock the doors and windows and burn the house and all the zârs!" But her burst of impiety, from all appearances, goes no further: punished for her insolence by immediately being struck by the zâr (scenario into which she enters) she will participate in the evening *wadâgâ* as if nothing had happened, as well as taking part in the other gatherings that will occur in the coming days. Similarly, when Asâmmanac declares that the *dankarâ* (war dance) is "kid stuff" her critique doesn't involve the essence of her faith, since she adds immediately that the same isn't true of the *gurri* by which one is "dominated." To whatever extent possession is a lie, apparently for the initiates it is at least a lie they believe as a whole, accepting it overall even if it is not always and in all respects free of contestation. Alongside those cases where the lie seems preponderant and where it would be proper to speak of acted theatre, there are cases in which the reality of the possession is not in doubt either for the main participant or for the assistants and which correspond to what may be called lived theatre. Seen another way, this may in fact be acted theatre but with a minimum of artifice and free of any intention to impose on the spectator. [. . .]

Essentially based on ecstatic techniques and directed toward the satisfaction of individual interests (curing of ills, success in business, etc.) much more than toward a general good even limited to one class of society, directed, moreover, by specialists openly paid by their clients (although the interested party can save face by receiving payment not in his own name but in that of one of the genies possessing him), this cult which is officially condemned but widely practiced and whose collective character alone justifies the title of religion instead of pure magic, includes an element equally discrediting and attractive: the theatrical aspects that are much more apparent than in properly religious ceremonies, either Christian or Muslim. For in the zâr cult we see the intervention—in the person of possessed individuals who assume their roles—of entities who are not simply mythic or legendary beings but out-and-out characters presenting themselves before an audience, using a characteristic language and in many cases their special emblem, the *fukarâ* or motto (a fairly free collection of stereotypes that make one think of homeric epithets), as well as their own gestures, ways of behaving, and in many cases vestimentary gear appropriate to their assigned nature, all of them having, finally, their peculiar tastes and sometimes even quasi-scenic requirements with regard to lighting—characters thus hardly different, except by their function, from those produced in the most traditional forms of our theatre.

Between the possession one could call authentic (spontaneous or induced but undergone in entire good faith, seen in a magico-religious

perspective where trance does not depend on any conscious decision on the part of the patient) and what one could inversely call inauthentic possession (deliberately simulated to make a show of oneself or to exert a pressure on another for the sake of material or moral gain) there are too many intermediaries, thus making the boundary difficult in practice to trace. In quite a few cases, for example, possession provides the possessed person with an alibi allowing him to utter words or accomplish acts from which he would refrain if he had to answer for them in his normal personality; does he avail himself of this alibi in a premeditated way (in which case his possession would be play acting, since he has arranged the scenario himself) or does he limit himself to taking advantage, more or less lucidly, of a situation he hasn't created (in which case, even though his good faith is not total, it would be imprudent to accuse him of trickery)? On the other hand, doesn't the patient for whom possession represents a step toward healing and who performs its gestures passively the way he might follow a medical prescription also act with a certain bad faith, without in any way lessening the fact that he aims solely to return to health and not to make an impression on those who watch him? Aside from the fact that his goal is serious and free of any notion of a game, does his case differ markedly – with respect to the possession's authenticity – from the case of a patient who finds trance to be a pleasure and who, as is usual among the women, dreams from early morning on (as in other climes one might dream of a ball) of the *wadâgâ* where she knows she will find satisfaction? In one case as in the other, possession is at least sought out and the zârs coming into play are personages incited there either by an honest desire for healing or else by a more frivolous thought of the pleasures they can immediately afford. Apparently these intermediary cases are by far the most numerous and thus we are justified in calling zâr possession – at least as openly practiced in Gondar in 1932 and 33 – a lived theatre, not an acted theatre or the expression of a collective delirium.

Lived by the actor (who has no difficulty, as we say, getting into the role, encouraged as he is by the ambiance and by his own belief in the *zâr* as a real spirit normally manifesting itself through possession), this strange brand of theatre which can never confess its theatrical nature is lived, equally, by the spectator. From moment to moment this person can also, in effect, be possessed, and in any event he is never a pure spectator, for not only does he contribute to the evocation of the spirits with hand-clapping or singing, but once they have "descended" he has commerce with them and is far from being kept at a distance by those who incarnate them. Even if he is not possessed in his turn and intervenes only secondarily, the spectator thus put on the spot participates in an event and lives it with its protagonists instead of being simply a passive witness. Thanks to this participation by all, this osmosis between actors and audience, such manifestations (though broken off from the ordinary course

of things) do not situate themselves like normal theatrical productions in a special space where the existences that unfold are separated from others, finding themselves therefore at the margin of life. What would seem to be at stake, in short, are privileged moments where collective life itself takes theatrical form.

[. . .] In a general way then, it is probable that if the theatre as such possesses a certain virtue of *katharsis* or "purgation" of the passions (less harmful once they have been exteriorized in scenic action), then from this perspective how much greater must be the virtue of a theatre where the person, far from remaining confined in passivity or losing itself in pure play, is completely engaged and even in some degree able to invent for itself the scenes whose protagonist it becomes. Such is the case for the gatherings and ceremonies of the zâr cults, and it seems legitimate to believe that the initiate obtains from them at least a certain euphoria, a positive benefit that can only produce an attachment to these practices, however discouraging their results may be in other domains. It seems we are touching on what gives magic such great force despite the denials continually inflicted by experience: the affective elements mobilized, with their stock of myths and images as well as the share of drama and performance they contain.

From Chapter 5, "Théâtre joué et théâtre vécu dans le culte des zâr," pp. 89–103.

Photo credit/Christian Gauffre

Leiris in his Paris apartment, 1982.

STONES FOR A POSSIBLE ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

Tr. by Lydia Davis

To speak of Alberto Giacometti as he himself spoke of Henri Laurens —by way of allusion, analogy, evoking an image with no analyzable relation to the trait to be revealed, rather than by way of argument or description.

In 1933, while I was spending the summer in Brittany—the land of menhirs, dolmens and cromlechs—shortly after returning from my first trip into black Africa (a trip which Giacometti later told me he had held against me because I went there in an official capacity), I had a series of dreams from which I take the following fragments without changing their chronology at all:

—On the ground floor or in the basement of a kind of museum containing a gymnasium in which children are playing, there is an attraction rather like the classic fair or amusement park ride known as the "Phantom Train"; it is called "Marriage" and perhaps it is a sort of Aunt Sally? Opening a door that resembles a theater flat, I go in. Here there are a number of chairs with folding seats like the seats in a concert hall; obliquely, at the far end, I see a small theater, hardly larger than a toy, that looks very like the sort of organ that is covered with mouldings and embellished with figures and that usually forms the central part of a merry-go-round. At the idea that, obeying the rule of this attraction, I am going to have to be conveyed among all these chairs, and that I will have to avoid touching them for fear of electric shocks or other even more disagreeable surprises, and that I will have no control over which path I take or how fast I go, I am seized with fear and I run off, abandoning the friend who is with me.

—in the half-sleep of morning, a dream I have just had and after which I have awoken—immediately or not?—takes the form of a rectangle the color of red ink which stands out, in a distinctly defined shape, against a piece of paper. This rectangle, perhaps actually *cut out* of the paper—and I don't really know whether this is somewhat stiff cardboard rather than just paper—is at once a proscenium (similar to those in Elizabethan theaters) and a human beard. Outside this rectangle an "old friend" happens to make a remark, an "old friend" who appears to me wearing the features of a bearded man whom I will later recognize as the Italian consul at Gondar, a city I lived in when I was in Abyssinia. I will abruptly forget this remark, the utterance of which figured as a sort of commentary on or moral to the whole revery, I will forget it at the very instant

when, having emerged from my half-sleep, I am about to write it down in a notebook. Despite some efforts, all I will succeed in unearthing amounts to this: a brief proposition indicating two alternatives and probably ending with "we have to . . . ate or . . . pose," a sentence of which I only know that the second of these two infinitive verbs of the first conjugation is something like "oppose," "dispose" or impose."

—Coming out of a reception where I have stood leaning on a cane that doesn't belong to me, whose handle—not curved into a crook but straight—is made of very gnarled wood though it has been polished by use, and where, so positioned, I have seen, among the other guests, a woman who is the wife of an Italian diplomat, I go to a sort of garage whose floor is damp with rain, in order to answer the call of nature. Facing a rather small garden which serves as a sculptor's studio, I do it. On an open-air workbench there are some fragments (particular pieces or just debris?) of medieval or Renaissance works of art. The garden, which I can only glimpse, separates the garage from a house with open windows which is the sculptor's house.

—In half-sleep I try to remember a couplet that seems to be a phrase containing a condensed revelation. Believing that I have grasped it clearly enough so that it can't escape me, I sit up in my bed and pick up a pad of paper where I want to make a note of it. Even though all I have to do now, in order to write it down, is to let the point of the pen or pencil run freely over the white paper, I stop short and see that it is impossible for me to remember it. Perhaps, in the second verse, there were the words "roses" and "fire"?

Giacometti's Italian Swiss background. His professional familiarity with minerals may explain why he seems to be carved out of rock. Yet there is no heaviness, nothing bearlike, about him; does a certain soberness in his gestures disguise his affinity with the lean animals (ibexes and Black African goats) who prefer to live on the steepest slopes?

In his not very mobile face, under his crown of woolly hair, a cannibal laugh often widely reveals his teeth. A character from a *commedia dell'arte* of the time of the Etruscans, perhaps, in which Harlequin the medicine man confronts Punchinello the child-eater; or perhaps a werewolf, if he must be compared to an animal (one that is prone, of course, to peculiar transformations). Note also that cannibals, who are more refined than is usually believed, have been credited by one sociologist with the invention of the fork.

Giacometti's art as questioning of the viewer himself through the work: a girl with her knees half bent as if offering something to the man looking at her (a position inspired by a little girl the sculptor once saw

in his native country); a figure pointing out to a third figure something that can only belong to the viewer's world; objects presented in the manner of experimental apparatuses or reduced models of fairs; etc. . . . Even more than the others, a woman standing, arms hanging, as motionless as a question mark.

Rectangular panels arranged vertically in a circle: a construction imagined by Giacometti and then worked out on paper, to recount several events that happened to him, for the most part, over the last few years and whose conducting wire was a dream that he wanted to note down; each panel corresponds to one of the events described and the whole system expresses their interconnections in time and space. This apparatus inevitably reminds us of one of the objects Giacometti made when he belonged to the Surrealist group: sculpted in plaster, it was a sort of scale model of a fair, and if the person looking at it should happen to fall into it, his adventure would unfold through the different parts of it.

To set up votive stones, to materialize experiences, to give lasting substance to the elusive or fleeting quality of an event, to fix realities using methods—when necessary—that borrow from naturalism whatever is indispensable if he is to convince us, but nothing more: this is, roughly, what Giacometti appears to be doing; he seems to have chosen a three-dimensional art as his most consistent way of expressing himself, because this the most difficult art to extricate oneself from without cheating.

One of Giacometti's major preoccupations: the scale on which the human being is represented in a work of art. What he finds striking in Jacques Callot's etchings, for example, is the smallness of the figures, who are lost in vast spaces and appear to be seen from a certain height.

Giacometti's statues—larger in the courtyard of his house or in the street than in his studio (littered with pieces of plaster which for a long time threatened to invade the little room where he slept in spite of the cold and the rain). This difference, because a creature always unfolds when it is no longer confined; more reasonably: because it is in the open air that one can judge human scale.

Until now, almost no one but astronomers concerned themselves with the *apparent diameter* and the *real diameter* of what they were looking at. Giacometti shows that he can make this sort of distinction when he fashions figures whose "natural height" doesn't depend on their height in meters and centimeters.

People standing, people walking, people crossing paths in a place that

may be public or private, an arm by itself, a nose springing out like the enormously indiscreet interference of a face: a few ways sculpture has of *putting in an appearance*, following one of the various systems conceived by Giacometti. And this is in the large atmospheric box where we live, a very different space from that of a museum.

In good weather or bad, individuals with no other relation to one another than the fact that they are all walkers going each in his own direction. No common denominator for them, except for—possibly—the woman who is also there but isn't moving and at whom these nameless men gaze—without complicity, each for himself alone.

To enumerate, to count, to survey desirable creatures, to recapitulate, to gauge and leave in suspense. Figures not so much grouped as juxtaposed and each of whom—without its solitude being in the least broken—is all the more emphatic for being situated or framed by the others. Here, what is singular increases by becoming a fragment of a plural, what is relative surpasses what is absolute, and the comparative says more than the superlative.

What you see when you walk down the sidewalk and everything strikes you at the level of your two eyes. What you only glimpse from your window.

Whereas usually a piece of sculpture is an object with space around it (exactly the opposite of a cannon, which is a hole encircled by bronze), Giacometti is now engaged in creating space that contains one or several objects.

What might make us believe that Giacometti is capable of byzantine subtleties: the faultless attention he pays to questions that are very simple (though, for this very reason, more difficult to grasp than many others, even if one limits oneself to pondering their terms), questions posed by the way people and things present themselves to us.

Confining himself to what is characteristic of man: to stand upright, to walk by moving his two legs one after the other. Recently, a sculptor of domestic animals too.

For several years, after an accident from which he escaped with one of his feet seriously injured, Giacometti was never seen walking without the help of a cane; then, one fine day, he decided to give up that implement, and as soon as he made that decision he moved about without any

support. In the same way, his sculptures still stand upright without either cane or crutch.

A gilttering trolley with small bottles and surgical dressings belonging to the Bichat Hospital that appeared in 1938 before the admiring eyes of the man with the broken foot and that reappeared twelve years later when the sculptor needed two wheels to isolate an effigy from the ground and fictively endow it with a capacity to move in spite of its absence of movement. Perched above the axle of this component of the vehicle (which is itself mounted on blocks), the woman no longer touches the ground and it is she herself who incarnates the sculptor's admiration for the trolley circulating among the beds.

The sudden memory of a forest, or of a clearing, depending on whether a random grouping of figures seems denser or more widely separated. Instead of being destroyed like so many others, the figures had accumulated as though they had been made just for this grouping—in which they will have come into their final transformation.

Feminine bodies arranged in a row, the same way girls in a brothel present themselves to be chosen. At The Sphinx, a vast expanse of gleaming floor relegated the nude bodies to an almost sacred distance; at the rue de l'Echaudé, on the other hand, their proximity (not very appetizing, finally) was almost aggressive within the four walls of a cramped room. The different heights of the supports and the scale itself of the figures made them farther away or closer, just as did the greater or lesser expanse of floor.

To integrate the support into the action, to make it a part of the sculpture, and so an object or piece of furniture with which the viewer is on an equal footing. Sometimes the opposite happens and the support separates, either suggesting the space of a stage or platform open to everyone (though in fact limited), or extending in lines defining the three dimensions of a cube of air in which the things are situated, or indeed becoming a container for the protagonist.

After the highly polished solids of the beginning (steles or shingles soaked for a long time, which are all that remain of the perception of a living body), after the open-work constructions and the games that refuse to close off space, what we have now are pin-sized figures and larger figures that are still thin, images of the vertical position, small proliferations of human structure around a plumb line.

The period in which these tall effigies were painted, dabbed with little

mostly rust-colored touches, as though this clayey color had been drawn to the surface by the need to give them blood.

Are they statues that have returned to their natural state following some accident or some treatment that remains to be defined? Or are they natural bodies promoted to the rank of statues after slight alterations or a ripening period?

How these latest sculptures of Giacometti have taken on the look of *found objects*. All things considered, one would be inclined to believe they are idols or mummies that have come out of hopelessly dry sand or volcanic soil. Compare with them: the desert concretion known as the "gypsum flower"; certain results in the earth of the process of erosion; utensils warped by burning lava or directly corroded by a wave of heat?

Extreme reduction of matter, following a law of economy that seems to determine both the quality and the quantity of the attack on it. No more than a little, the smallest bit of matter needed, and by its own action stripped of all luster, as though to show plainly that richness lies elsewhere.

To scratch down to the bone, to what is indestructible. Or else—the opposite—to add space when one seems to want to eliminate a few ounces of material.

Between geological matter and air, there is the shared surface.

Something of the ruins of Pompeii and the wall paintings that have remained fresh in spite of wind, storm, ashes. In happy discoveries of the sort that archeologists make, millennial antiquity converges with the flashing rupture of time: the sudden unveiling of a face forever contains all of the long past. As for his own discoveries, it seems that Giacometti—directing his hands as one would direct workers proceeding with the excavations—would like to dig them up, fully outfitted, from his own brain.

Intense concern for speed, without which there could be no creation. In contrast to the patiently elaborated work of art, here we have the thing that suddenly appears, all the more manifest because it seems to have sprung up without any history and without any roots: instantaneous and outside of time. From this point of view, to destroy something completely is more worthwhile than to correct it. Seeing the sorts of slaughters that Giacometti has been indulging in, I have sometimes wondered if for him sculpting means making something that he can then demolish.

Make, perfect, destroy, then make again, perfect again, destroy again . . . out of a desire to be rigorous, up to the moment when circumstances require that the thing be finished, and it is halted just as it is, the desire for rigorousness having simply been supplanted by submission to circumstances, just as one law succeeds another.

The problem of *real presence*—posed and solved by Giacometti while it seems to have escaped almost all of our sculptors, who are either pure architects or the makers of mannequins whose stuffing doesn't prevent them from being absent. In the same way, negro sculptors are not so much trying to represent their models as to allow them to be there (and they are prepared to let their figures later crumble into dust).

A stone in the shape of a head is at once a stone and a head; but could one say the same thing of a head made of stone?

When it is painted, a bronze escapes its condition of being a sculpture more easily than when it has kept its metallic look. If *Falling Man* was left out of the series of works which Giacometti subjected to this treatment in 1950, was that because a fall cast in bronze is never in danger of solidifying into a statue?

"Hollyhock," "saint of the abyss," "white phantoms" falling "from our burning sky": a sequence of themes from one of the most famous *Chimeras* by the man whom posterity will perhaps simply call "Gérard," as his friends did; a sequence of themes which I would also be tempted to apply to the series of feminine figures sculpted during all these past few years by "Alberto," who says he absolutely does not come from Ile-de-France but from a country with severe cold weather and plenty of mountains and snow.

"Pierres pour un Alberto Giacometti," *Derrière le Miroir*, No, 39–40, 1951; *Brisées*, pp. 125–145.

ENVOI

Tr. by J. Clifford

In the second act of *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*, the play where Aimé Césaire makes a hero of Shakespearian proportions out of a former

porter become king, a character appears for a short scene: the Spaniard Franco de Medina is sent by Louis XVIII to invite Christophe, who reigns over northern Haiti, to return to the bosom of France; but he succeeds only in angering the king, who condemns him to death. He is seen departing for the place of execution, escorted by some soldiers. An entry, a few quick words, an exit, that's all there is to the part—one wonders what actor could make anything of such a "walk on," a role wholly subordinate and without lustre. In any case, up until this performance (among those given in Dakar in 1965), no one had done anything at all with the part, if they had even tried.

As luck would have it the director of the troupe, Jean-Marie Serreau, had to play the part impromptu, filling in for its incumbent who was called back to Paris on other business. Neither Césaire nor any friends in the audience like myself knew of the replacement. Thus our surprise was great when the new Franco de Medina came on stage and we saw this calamitous figure suddenly changed into something other than the drab silhouette we were familiar with.

Two ideas as easy as pie. The historical Franco de Medina was a Spaniard and obviously his French pronunciation would show it—a chance for Serreau to give some caricatural vigor to his personage by adding a strong accent. Theatrically, the exit posed a problem: how should he go away to his death? A ravaged demeanour would have been too melodramatic and a martial carriage too "stiff upper lip"—the result being that until now interpreters of the part prudently avoided all psychological indications and in consequence the scene fizzled. But Serreau was able to get out of the problem by adding an evident limp to the burlesqued accent of his Franco de Medina—a double stroke because, on the one hand he singularized him even more by making him lame, and on the other created an immediate scenic impact by having him walk to his death pitifully dragging a leg behind, gouty perhaps like his royal master.

I have always admired the way an actor, by sheer ingenuity, could give consistency to this character that Césaire put in his play only to bring out a facet of Christophe's personality. To grasp right away all the different elements and brilliantly solve the problem, this is what Serreau did, a man of the theatre bending to the needs of the play but remaining scrupulous enough to do so without falling into gratuitousness. Thus conjugated into truth, fantasy ended with the absolute *presence* of a figure who, formerly, did not exist.

From *Le Ruban au cou d'Olympia*, 1981, pp. 22–23.

MICHAEL PALMER

from BAUDELAIRE SERIES

(Baudelaire series)

You say
A miracle from Heaven

You say
I'm fine I'm fine I'm really going blind

Gay as a skylark today
You say

I haven't an ache or a pain
in me in my body inside

I'm fine I'm fine I'm really going blind
It's a joy to be alive

I had a visitor tonight
with suit and beard and Malacca cane

climbed through my window
and entered me

Is this such a bad thing
Is this a thing at all

Each evening there's a poppy in my brain
which closes before dawn

Whatever happens then will not happen again
Please move my arm

(Baudelaire series)

She says, Into the dark –
almost a question –
She says, Don't see things –
this bridge – don't listen

She says, Turn away
Don't turn and return
Count no more lines into the poem
(Or could you possibly not have known

how song broke apart while all the rest watched –
that was years ago)
Don't say things
(You can't say things)

The ground is smooth and rough, dry and wet
Pull the blue coat tighter around you
(There are three parts to you)
I'm not the same anymore

I'm not here where I walk
followed by a messenger confused
(He's forgotten his name)
I'm not here as I walk

not anyone on this path
but a figure of walking
a figure projected exactly this far
followed by the messenger confused

(He's forgotten his name)
Don't say his name for him
Don't listen to things
(You can't listen to things)

Some stories unthread what there was
Don't look through an eye
thinking to be seen
Take nothing as yours

(after Rilke, "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes")

(Baudelaire series)

She says, You are the negative –
behind you an horizon in red
and the horizon a question
a mark in final red
your eyes are sealed against

She says, You do not know when

She says, You are counter
You are degrees only
and now in summer a mouthful of blood
and sutured nylon thread

You are professor of watery tablets
from moment to memory a swollen debt

She says, You cannot not hear this
Far less than a second will have passed

(Kootenay sonnet)

(Baudelaire series)

At the table we say
You are columnar, a cloud
A page is paper
What of lines through things

At the table we say
The eye is twice divided
It will ask something of song
It will cause a broken thought

At the table you say
Don't calculate with scissor and watch

Don't mirrorise
Don't be Civil Guard

At the table it is said then sworn:
not and not:
not devotional metalog
not rector of lament

And here we ask what
what critical love or fear
what theory of degrees
what northern house

And we ask what house
what window to that house
what linen or bed
what sentence it wants

what sentence it measures out
asking after of before
(its question to the poem)
and neck and hip to bend just so

since the house cannot be ours
At the table one by one
each comma and period are erased
then patiently each sound

as each shadow or shape hidden by sound
Now it is a house
Now it is the vacant house
(It will ask something of song)
Now it's the liar's burning house

PETER REDGROVE

from THE MUDLARK POEMS

THE FIRST MUDLARK

Swaggering among the distillations,
The resplendent oils of the woodland swamp,
Its water-mirrors and soft turfy bars
That glitter with fire-in-the-dew which is the spirit,

I am masked in bacilli and volatilities
And fellow-drinkers, the bacteria are delighted
And swarm over Gulliver celebrating;
It is their fertility-dance, in black.

The alcohol swamp by the sea,
With its bubbling glasses,
Dispensary of many many bottles,
All uncorked,
Mixing your medicines with your poisons;

Nobody knows how rolling
In the ploughed field or in the morass
Creates a sexuality which is magic;
Clearly the morass has it already, and the fields,
And the ferny bars
Where drunk men plunge through black mirrors
Containing all possible colours of flowers.

THE BIG STORE

I.

The butterflies that feed on sheep-dung,
Oily sheep-dung, and spread more gorgeous rainbows

Across their backs, more plangent velvets;
There are the flints cracked into blue and white
Like sky underground, butterfly-wing blue;
There is the flint-mine full of sealed firmaments,
And the blue thistle bursting out of the sealed mine,
In its choking collar like a fountain of sky;
And there are the bright butterflies that live on oil
Of lighted ships' lanterns and spread
Their illuminated costumes across their backs;

On the floors of the meadows, in the basements of the lakes,
Among the moving stairways of the air-currents and currents of water
In multi-level emporia it is a city made of the Big Store;

A city where the shop windows are opened wide,
Full of pubs with the alcohols circulating,
Juices of infinite electricity, and the cells of the trees
All stacked like the old smugglers' bottles, square
So they won't roll and give the game away,
Honeycombs of Irish cream and whisky; the populations
Have the freedom of the Midsummer Sales, returning home
With stouted baskets, soft goods, all the groceries of blood.

II.

The cedar-smelling water from the spring
Under the cedars; I am shopping
For black mud that is soft goods and visit
Its night-escalator down into the lighted shop
Of the million candles under the swamp;

I am a regular customer of the wet wood and the small stream
That rounds into its velveteens and frogs; my fear
Summons the assistants who unroll the streams to let me see,
Unroll the little brook like a counter of silk,
Like the moth I enter and sip more gorgeous light
Like produce of the rock tree underground and its fruct
Of flints easing its tributory boughs slowly,
Overhead streaming with the heavenly blue juice of flints.

THE GOGING STOOL
(Mudlark VI)

The HWCH or Witch. The scribe, the scraper,
The spirit-sculptor of the Mother-of-All,
Mother of Source, the Widow, the One Alone,
Communicator. All that belonged to that firstness
Was afterwards derided and denounced but is.
Bring that to the Goging Stool, the Quagmire
Is the Accuser, choke the criminal in it,
The whore or the coward in it, the abominable
Rat of the sun in it. I will seize you
Utters every thread of this earthenware
Until you discover in me
Your name and the name of every part of you
Which is my name.

So he is mud, walking.
He is the great decay of himself, but walking.
The green threads run into his back.
He is learned in the dumbschool.
He was recovered
On the balance-beam of the cucking-stool.
He is a lump of earth, the sod.
We might wind it in funeral flowers,
Sew in it a suit of flowers, walking,
We might plant him with wreathes,
We might bathe it white in spattering falls
And return him remaining to his family
Created anew.
That lump was his dead shadow, gone on the stream.

Thus we created HWCH
In the shadows of the creek, and he was one.
He was purified in yesty ground
Bubbling with salt waters.
He was an unformed child, in his ferment.
He is close to the shadows, by our action,
If he wasn't HWCH then he is now,
Joined to his source.
We accosted him and punished him,
Assaulted him, fitted him to sin,
Member of both worlds, gatekeeper,
A route and door

And belonging to the Gog who quakes
The bubbling, the pulsing place, the Makemire.

MUDLARK X

As in 'those thin-filled Mappes we yet
Finde the name of Walsingham' I am lying in mud
From whence the winds are generated
Looking for the small town
That lies behind everything.

I smell this town with noble avenues, but as yet
See only mud upon my body. I rise
And brush it off my clothes
Though it leaves
Great Mappes and cold breath.

I can smell that other Town
With the ancient silver lanes,
The slate phosphorescent with the rain
In the winged hives among the strawberry canes,
Such disparates, in the white castle
That is the clay refinery, in the cargo-vessel
White with china-clay,
Solid white even in its black holds;

The small town is its other cargo,
The small town behind this small town that I smell
And hear now in the bee-hum, the engine-thud.

My wife played lute to me as I washed the longe Mappes off,
My charts of navigation to the Smalle Towne,
And as she played her instrument to me
That bathroom gave admittance to the Smalle Towne
And I could fling the smalle windowe open and call nakede
To my bathfellows, and when I did this
The sun that belonged to Walsingham
Shone on these docks as well. I donned
An ordinary shirt and trousers, fitting garb

That recalls a dreamers clothes, or pyjamas,
Unisex, and while we ate I saw
At our table twenty priests and priestesses
Dining post-coitally in candlelight
From Walsingham. I knew
It was where the man with cold breath lived,
But when you drew nearer to his house
His breath grew warme, smelling of seaweed,
And visible, like Mappes of noble tides.

MUDLARK

I.

Rolling in the mud
Will bring her back,
Will bring the sun back,
Will bring the summer on,
The human skin
Bristled as by the electricity
Of the growing land;
Rolling in the mud,
Gathering the zyme.
She sighed
Once or twice,
Then shuddered, then died,
The sigh of a meditation,
The complete relaxation.
In the ploughed field roll,
Between the wet furrows
The mortal panting.
Death is so terrible
God alone should bring it.
My organs have gone cold
With her death,
The cups of meat
Which were eyes.
Under the sun the warm mud
Draws itself up to its full height of flowers

II.

Rolling in the socket,
In the dead eye,
The bird balancing the evening,
Turning its mortices,
The fly unlidding its wings;
In the clay is hidden
A white dove,
And in the mud is hidden
A mica-winged pollinator
Of all flowers that feast the eyes;
And set in the firmament of the bedrock
In its granite pond is a mineral sun.
I hear my mortal panting
Like a bed-partner's breathing,
The head in the belly nods
Once or twice, and sighs;
It is a little death.
I repair to the laboratory,
The laboratory within the rock,
The moulting wings of scoriae,
I am clothed in rust
The colour of silver-tarnish
Look for me, I am an unseen
In my low cave of imprint
My forme, and I pass unseen;
I am one of her kind now
And to bring her back with me
Work as deep as I can and low.

BIVOUAC

Among the Polish Chassidim, perhaps among the Chassidim generally in Eastern Europe, it was prohibited to leave a book open in the village reading room. A sacred book, that is. Interfering forces might invade it, or escape from it.

A shadow might, otherwise, cross the open pages. The shadow might distort the features of a divinity which inhabited the pages, at once hidden and open. Or an expression on those features might run wild into the world, unmediated by any mind, the reader's, who sat there in his cloak being bothered by his fleas.

The word desired to be dulled. If not by the mind of this or that reader, with or without fleas, then by the clapping shut of the book. Otherwise the pneuma might break out and be at large, tigerishly among the furrowed desks, or hopping mad in the muddy or sunbaked little village streets.

The book had covers to shield its pages from mud or sunlight. Not even fingers had any title to cross the track of the word. The covers also existed to contain the scorching majesty of the word. At least, a risk was set aside. Who knows, the majesty might otherwise choose to spill out as idiocy and make havoc, or too much heaven, among the huts.

It was also an offense to place one open book on top of another open book. The charms of the pneuma were inviolable, transcendental.

The light shoots shadows into this room, across the pages of books and a few squares of Philippine reed carpet. Somehow I love it so. Outside, the trunk of an elm spells out a green shadow across blades of grass, the quiverings of which can only be detected if you take the time to watch, if you truly care, if you quiver a bit yourself. The grass blades tilt at an inexplicable mass of angles. Their tips ought to be points, but actually are bitten off, because every so often I try to mow the shadows down and the mower's cruciform blade rips across them. Underneath the mower's metal casing the momentarily unseen, as grass, suffers this.

No matter. A sheet of paper on the desk surface carries the print of the insect screen, a tight cross-hatching. This keeps the little winged demons out and holds a whiteness in. Nothing written contradicts the self-sufficiency of the word; its complex force, noted only in various proximate oscillations, disdained by the flea, unapparent in action, otherwise in hope, is a fiction so threatening that we devise our most dazzling footwork to pull a little fruit out of the teeth of disaster.

Here, too, on this bitter grass near dusk I saw the cicada come into being. First it had made its long journey up a perpendicular tunnel to the earth surface; the cicada itself had lubricated the tunnel with a juice it exuded through its protective pupa. Now, inside the bronze pupa, which was crisping, a general shiver began to happen. An infinitesimal foot prodded a hole in the pupa, then another foot. Gradually the head was coming out, then the body, forwards, but for twenty minutes it made a lunge, rested, lunged again. Its moment of emergence was so prolonged that it could hardly be seen emerging. The motive and the power behind this effort – barely imaginable – I felt them in my groin as a sensation between craving and fright, then in my throat as a taste, brandy and pepper.

Finally, mute and dull, an oval pellet had shrugged the pupa off. The pellet put a leg out, soon another leg. Its back was turning emerald, then golden emerald, with wings that lay flush with the pellet, exceedingly frail, then larger, unfurling into twin networks of golden emerald filigree tracery. And the head, with eyes, had woken up, was turning this way and that way; now the wings could move and lift. The cicada glowed as if dusted with a pollen out of which, for the sake of argument, the breath of a beyond conjectured the world's first agile anatomies. Pristine forest contracted to the volume of a singing bird's egg. A fiery drop of universe at the other end of a tunnel through time.

So I lay down on the grass and put an ear to it. I was expecting the wings to rustle and give off a melodious twang, faint as the last echo of a Jew's harp in an Egyptian burial chamber.

Then it simply wasn't there. From high up in an elm its first ancient cackle fizzed into the onset of dark.

BOB PERELMAN

THREE POEMS

WORD STIMULI

I am split, it is written,
parallel lines pressing powerfully together.
Past and present, which came first?
(one growing more obvious all the time)
went down to the mouth, one fell in and

Facts as shrines, the isolated object theory
is just doing its job
alongside the soft buttery throes of word stimuli
like "war" makes Nietzsche excited
and "pity" pitiless.

The Bible, drawn and quartered, says what it says
in the silence of a televised execution.
To get near the forbidden
description of the body, read
the victim's mother's face in the paper,
examine the murderer's feces
and note the fall of clods in the field blown up by dynamite
simply to be able to plant there next spring.

Inside this split, the body
with its secret names lies open
like a fresh dug grave to the Almighty,
fathered by no one, thunder billowing
through a rent in the scenery to overpower speech.

In the cave a short intense mating between sound and meaning.
White shorts and jogging thighs emerge pulsing as one,
the Third World tucked safely away
inside some disadvantaged individual's search
for a meaningful form in which to write down his or her
experience statistics or just hope the letter gets printed
in USA TODAY

cheap distribution and rapidly becoming dematerialized
because, because *nothing*.

LET'S SAY

A page is being beaten
back across the face of "things."
Inside me there's a book of no color, its pages riffling as I breathe, a moving point, torn out
and I read this scrapbook of desire
let's not say constantly
asleep and provoked by the economics of cliffs, galleys, cartoons, explosive devices patterned to look like adults reading signs
casually, very fast
and in this wind, leavened by sun
or am I merely reading that
backwards, inside the restaurant where they serve the parts
by number, innuendo
and the you or the I spends its life
trying to read the bill
alone in the dark
big wide streets lined with language glue

A page is being written.
It's fun to chew, to work things out
to close the damn book
to sit in the sand with a radio
no bikini no tan line no body
sun, plot
a dream matchup
you can either go up or down, no middle ground
the floor is sexualized, tessellated with little languages crying out speak me, squash me, love me up into one libidinous hunk of noise, you great big missing other, yoo hoo, over here
and the finished word is an album of past pleasure
smoking out one last incomprehensible nuance beside still waters
that talk their talk
of which you are the noun
the one and only

and the model breaks, leaving
a nasty little landscape which *you*
and the group of course
the other the slaughtered city, the strafed farms
silently
in large heated buildings
the smell means money
and the classics are being straddled
a page is being beaten
O parse me, says the son to the so-called absent father
in a suit by the lakefront in Cleveland
sixty degrees and a fishing pole
the breeze or am I reading water again

PERSON

Eats, drinks, sticks aromatic pipe in mouth, and asks,
What society (books piled on varnished desk, vanished races, where have I smelled that smell before I was born, a hard-headed pragmatism standing in the empty spaces . . .
What society has ever not fashioned a human
receptacle for its narrative wastes?
C'est la guerre the garage the riding mower
the obtrusive stories that don't stop when the sun goes down all at once like an isolated event,
low blood sugar lowering the rate of vocabulary utilization,
the world, the universe, the mind of god cushioning the fall of the dead letter,
water coming into the river from an unknown source.
Sometimes you just have to go lie down with the unnamed by-products.

They have no names, not because of some intrinsic human stupidity,
but because there's no place to put all the flash cards,
Mother & Father have loaded the tray so full.
Plus the fact that food is fashion and thus
bites the hand that eats it,
or, to put it differently,
the Great Salt Flats are the thighs of what conceivable being,

the wood from whose Proust
no contractor, no matter how liberal the building code
—glass houses conceived in sin from day one,
blizzards of chance down upon the fountain of youth,
all without a verb,
because capitalism makes nouns
and burns the connections.

Words get forced, like the fugitive in *The 39 Steps,*
into making a speech about what? ending in cheers with the speaker in handcuffs.
And in fact one's own crudely physical body has never been in this second before, it's less likely than it looks, imagine a TV growing legs and talking.
If a TV could talk we wouldn't understand it.

The intimate journal protects its secrets.
The intimate flesh projects its secrets.
In the bathroom: Kill a (Jew crossed out) Nazi.

JOHN YAU

ALAN COTE: THE ROLE OF DRAWING

Alan Cote's career can be divided into two distinct phases connected by a transitional period in which earlier concerns are inverted, examined, and then extended. In both the transitional period and the most recent phase drawing plays a major role. From the late 1960's until the early 1970's, the artist employed a predetermined compositional approach which allowed him to make a decision about his choice of color at every step of the way. The paintings can be characterized as saturated monochromatic fields in which differently colored beveled bars of equal length are deployed. Despite the fact that each bar is defined by a single intense hue, they disturbed neither each other, nor the insistent flatness of the field. Cote was primarily concerned with the structuring of color. His paintings were brash, elegant, and toughminded.

Then, around the middle 1970's, Cote began prying apart the implied grid of his earlier paintings. By the late 1970's, he had not only broken down an already broken grid, but he was mining the allusive possibilities inherent in its ragged structure. The lines curved or veered off in another direction, causing the drawings to suggest the topography of an ice floe, say. At the same time, the paintings became increasingly referential. Though, like the drawings, they were made up of abstract marks placed in an abstract realm.

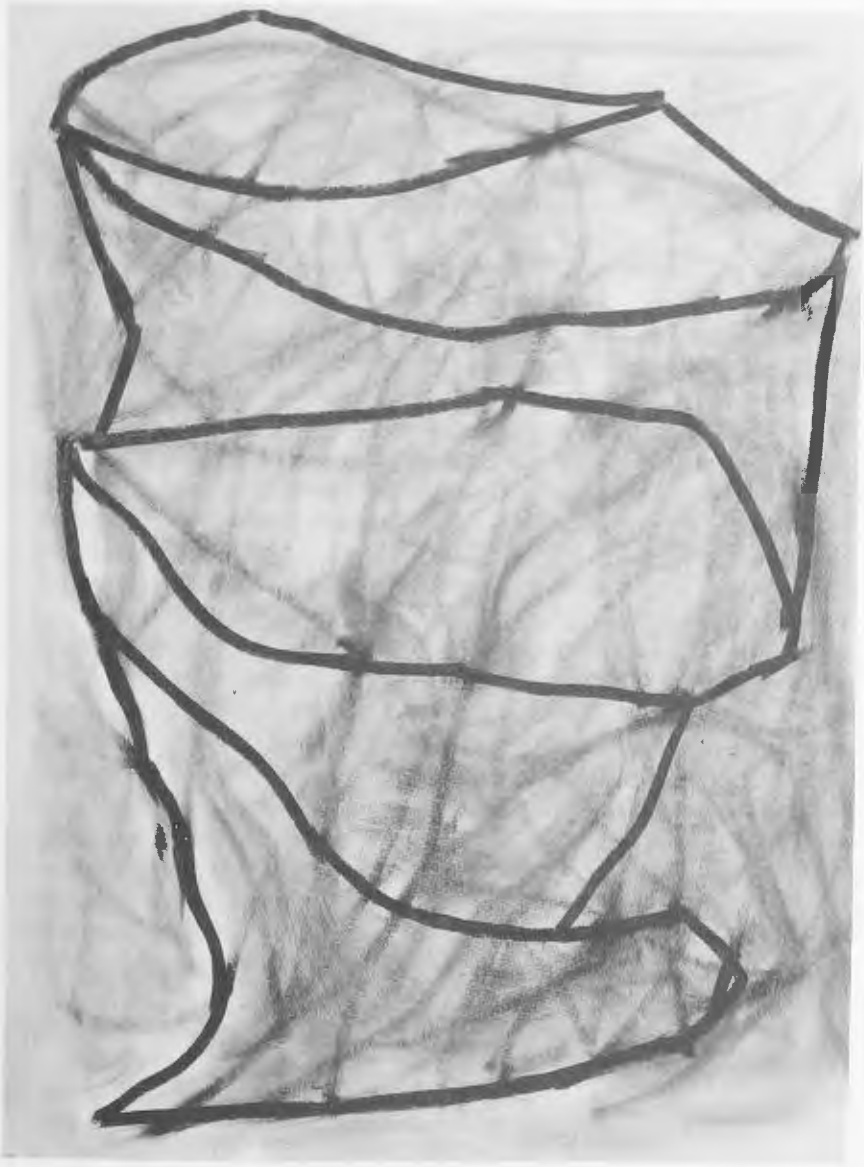
As a result, color began functioning in a very different way than it did in the earlier work. It could advance one area of a painting, while recede in another. A cluster of abraded strokes might be asked to disturb a saturated ground. Value jumps are unexpected, evocative, disturbing, and pungent. These possibilities are the direct result of Cote's decision to draw with color, make it expressive. He has deliberately undermined the grid that once held his beveled bars securely in place. Now, instead of structuring color, he is using color to structure very specific perceptions. And yet, like the earlier paintings, the viewer cannot take in one form without taking in the rest. An all overness persists in each composition. In a recent painting, for example, a fallen tree—all hot pink lines and swirls—seems to have burrowed into a dark blue ground, used the thwarted force of its sweet color to hold its place in the painting. This isn't the artist's description of an event. It is a conceptual image in which a natural event and the act of painting is understood as being both interchangeable and synonymous.

ALAN COTE

THREE DRAWINGS

SCENT IN THE AIR / 1984
Pastel and charcoal / 50 x 38 inches

WALKING IN THE DARK / 1983
Charcoal and pastel / 50 x 38½ inches



SIX VIEWS OF A MOUNTAIN / 1983
Charcoal / 50 x 38 inches
Photos courtesy of Washburn Gallery, New York City.

McGANN AGONIST

At the heart of a crisis in contemporary literary criticism is the systematic use of "text" for "poem." According to Jerome McGann, a *poem* is a social event—a *work* of literature—embedded in a dynamic, multilayered historical and ideological context. In contrast, a *text* is a deanimated linguistic structure—a *document*—removed from sociohistorical context. "What we ought to see," says McGann in *The Beauty of Inflections*, "is that 'text' is the linguistic state of the 'poem's' existence. No poem can exist outside of a textual state any more than a human being can exist outside of a human biological organism. But just as a person is not identical to a particular body, so neither is a poem equal to its text" [p. 22].

This metaphor suggests a parallel between New Criticism and behaviorism; both collapse the operant distinction between a mechanism (*behavior*) and a function (*action*). McGann's polemic takes up the philosophical and political imperatives of Bakhtin, asserting that language is a social act and meaning is interdependent on social context; it offers an alternative to imagining language as a formal system in which meaning is derived by a variety of internal differentiations.

McGann's "historically based critical procedure" represents one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated efforts in academic literary criticism to reverse the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing tendencies not only in New Critical "close reading" but also in structuralist and poststructuralist "textualizations." The goal is not to reject, wholesale, these heterogenous developments but rather to incorporate them, where possible, into an historical program that would radically alter the practice of literary criticism by redressing the current schism between textual and bibliographic scholarship (investigations of the history of the text and reception of the

Three books by Jerome J. McGann are discussed in this essay: *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). McGann is Dreyfuss Professor of Humanities at California Institute of Technology and editor of the five-volume *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works* now in progress from Oxford University Press.

work) and literary criticism (that is, interpretation). For McGann, textual and bibliographic research is not preliminary and incidental to the interpretation of literary works, it is a basic part of the interpretative act. That is, their function is not simply textual emendation but, more importantly, establishing the significance of the context of publication. As McGann repeatedly shows, the same text has different meanings—*is a different poem*—depending on where and when it appears.

In 1983, McGann published two short books, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* and *The Romantic Ideology*, aimed, respectively, at making a decisive intervention within the practices of textual scholarship and literary criticism. Because these books are akin to legal briefs—summarizing major positions and formulating an alternative, ideologically self-conscious program—they emphasize how seriously McGann takes the precedence of historical engagement over "pure theory"; that is, they demonstrate his commitment to sociohistorical *reflection* as an essential part of any meaningful historical engagement. When McGann criticizes his profession for repressing the ideological character of its subjects, his point is that neither poetry nor criticism transcends ideology. (An interesting, and provocatively truncated, appendix to *The Romantic Ideology* argues that Louis Althusser and Pierre Macherey are wrong to suggest that art is not to be counted among the ideologies; however, this crucial point is best understood as a corrective to Althusser's more general formulation of the concept of ideology in his germinal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" [in *Lenin and Philosophy*; New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971], a formulation on which McGann's relies.)

For McGann, it is not just the historical subjects of literary criticism that need to be recognized; rather, and rather more crucially, contemporary criticism's own institutionally based ideological formations must also be explicated. Literary criticism can never be the final arbiter of the fixed meaning of a "text," just as literary or linguistic theory cannot be the ultimate explicator of fixed systems of meaning. In contrast, McGann's two tracts insist that literary criticism is an active participant in the continuing reception—*reproduction*—of *works*. I say "tracts" to emphasize McGann's stylistic extension of his ideological interventions; these pamphlets are in every sense didactic; their virtue is to be repetitive and blunt more often than elusive and elegant. If there can by any doubt that this is deliberate, the contrast with *The Beauty of Inflections* will settle the matter. McGann's expansive, thoughtful readings of works by Keats, Byron, Crabbe, Coleridge, Christina Rossetti, Tennyson, and others are exemplary of the possible fruits of his program. Swimming against the tide of literary theory without literature, McGann anchors his methodological and interpretive craft in close, and contextual, readings of specific poems.

In *The Romantic Ideology*, McGann argues that the criticism of Romanticism, to our own day, has uncritically absorbed the key self-representations of the Romantic Movement. Terms like "spirituality," "creativity," "process," "uniqueness," "diversity," "synthesis," "reconciliation," "imagination," "poetic truth" are accepted as fundamental human concepts that need not, and cannot, be analyzed. McGann contends that the belief that Poetry transcends history and ideology (in the sense of false consciousness) is an essential element in Romantic displacement, the "grand illusion" that one may escape the disappointments of history through imagination and poetry: "a sense sublime," as Wordsworth had it in "Tintern Abbey," "Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns . . . / A motion and a spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things." While the wrecks of history "fade and fall to ruin," McGann comments, "the abbey of the mind suffers no decay . . . The poem generalizes—we now like to say mythologizes—all its conflicts, or rather resituates those conflicts out of a sociohistorical context and into an ideological one" [pp. 87–89]. "The polemic of Romantic poetry, therefore, is that it will not be polemical; its doctrine, that it is non-doctrinal; and its ideology, that it transcends ideology" [p. 70].

Romantic ideology has descended to us, says McGann, largely through the lines of thought that have developed from Coleridge and Hegel (the German ideology). But while the Romantic ideology of 1789 to 1824 was articulated, to a large extent, by poets skeptical of many of its features, this ambivalence and self-consciousness largely disappears in the debased forms of Romantic ideology we encounter today. McGann censures his own 1968 study, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development*, because of its absorption in Romanticism's self-representations and its presumption of the poet's linear development (a biographic teleology that cripples much critical thinking about art).

The uncritical acceptance of Romantic ideology, however, poses problems for more than the study of Romanticism. The effect is all the more disastrous when, institutionally reified, this ideology continues to be the basis for the reception of post-Romantic poetry by an influential segment of what McGann calls the clerisy, that is, literary academia. In this light, the grotesque, yet systematic, misjudgments about twentieth century poetry by a critic of Romanticism such as Harold Bloom become more understandable, if no less excusable. McGann's sometimes humorous self-consciousness, true to his own didactic intentions, specifically keeps the focus on "that narrowest and most cloistered of spheres . . . the critical work produced by the literary academy" [p. 59]. It would be a mistake to ignore the pervasiveness of the same debased Romantic ideology as it informs much contemporary American poetry. Indeed, a broad range of seemingly antagonistic tendencies in current writing share a conception

of poetry as giving a "voice" to unmediated "basic truths" of "imagination" and "feeling" through "direct expression" of human "creativity"; they also share an allergic reaction to any intimation, in a poem, of intellectual or ideological self-consciousness. Absorption in Romanticism's self-representations, then, is not only a problem for critics; it is also a problem for poetry. This is the kind of reciprocal interaction in our own time that McGann sees as central to understanding the ideological context and reception of past and present literature.

I take McGann's various explications of Romantic ideology to be provisional, that is, a stage in the development of an historical criticism informed as much by the contemporary ideological climate as by Romantic "texts." While McGann rejects René Wellek's view that there is a basic unity underlying the various manifestations of Romanticism, he does not quite adopt A.O. Lovejoy's skepticism—Romanticisms not Romanticism. The first step in breaking from the spell of a unified Romanticism is to recognize its particular and parochial ideological formations. McGann notes the fundamentally Christian character of the Romanticism formulated by Coleridge and formalized by Hegel. It is not surprising, then, that Heine—a poet inclined to consciously resist absorption in Christian Romanticism—would write a work McGann finds paradigmatic for historical criticism, *The Romantic School.* Heine "writes between 1833 and 1835 as an expatriate German Jew to a French intellectual audience about a cultural phenomenon, German Romanticism, which is now historically concluded . . . At every point Heine is concerned with the problem of the immediate relevance of removed cultural resources—in this case, German Romantic literary works. He is qualified to take up this problematic matter because he contains in himself, as it were, a crucial division of sympathies and knowledge" [p. 33]. Heine's otherness can serve as a reminder that Romantic ideology was one among many ideological formations present in the early nineteenth century. Which is to say, the history of literary criticism is as much a history of unheard or disregarded voices as it is of the privileged voices able to "dominate" a period (originally or in retrospect). The increased prominence that historical method gives to the history of a work's reception makes imperative that lacunas—failures or refusals of reception or publication—be enabled to speak as loudly as the ideas that flowed unimpeded through official cultural channels. Otherwise we will see, as we have seen over and again, the intially tragic story of marginalized lives told in farcically amnesiac official histories of English and American writing.

In this respect, McGann makes a useful distinction between Romantic works and the Romantic Period, citing Austen and Crabbe as non-Romantic writers of the Romantic Period. He is particularly irritated at attempts, for example, to reverse the critical "neglect" of Austen by trying to make her out as a closet Romantic. Nonetheless, the kind of critical

thinking that McGann encourages will hopefully move more in the direction of Romantic *ideologies* than he presently allows for, without vitiating the polemical edge of his term; perhaps, that is, the non-Romantic ideologies of the "Romantic Period" may even erode the legitimacy of that monicker. McGann's position on such problems is basically pragmatic; he wants to develop an historical methodlogy that will be as *teachable* as New Critical reading. Radical skepticism about periodization and ideological characterizations may be difficult to teach, but it is just this type of institutionally motivated thinking that led to many of the problems with New Criticism. Critical thinking has not fared any better under historical narratives than it has under structural verities. While an historical and ideological dimension needs to be restored to discussions of literature, positivism and reductionism are perennial dangers. McGann is acutely aware of these problems, despite his troubling espousal of the hegemony of the sociohistorical method as "the general *science* governing [the] human context" [*Inflections*, p. 63; my italics]. (The troubling positivism within the natural sciences is exactly the suppression of this sociohistorical context.) But his intensely reflective example, his consistent reiteration of the tendentiousness and ideological character of his own (or any) historical account, will not necessarily be heeded by those adopting his program.

McGann's method would remove poetry from the pedestal of the purely beautiful and sublime, beyond or above ideology, where it is constantly at risk of dissolving into the "spirit of the age," or worse, "the spirit of the ages"—authorless, contentless. To tar poetry with the name of "false"—i.e., historical, partisan—consciousness is to return it to the field of contention and *use*. It is as valuable to take issue with Shelley's "doctrines," as one would take issue with Napoleon or Rousseau, as to savor his "exquisite sensibility." This requires a recovery of the historically specific situations in which poems of the past were written, published, republished, reviewed, and read (all different dynamics). It means we stop reading past works as if they were contemporary or temporally transcendent and start to appreciate their value as culturally alienated and socially estranged.

"We have to recover those traditional philological procedures for putting us in touch with worlds, people, and experiences from the past, and with the media in which these things embodied themselves; for putting us in touch with them in the full range of their pastness and differentials. The ultimate purpose of establishing a structure of such differentials is not to lose one's self in a displaced world, which is certainly a danger in pursuing such methods, but to gain a measure by which our present interests and ideologies may be critically observed. Past worlds, in an historical consciousness, make up points of fixity and finishedness, but not in some permanent and absolute sense. The finished past is constantly being reformulated into new forms of finishedness, forms which answer to the changing needs of the immediate world. Nevertheless, whatever

form of finishedness the past may take, it can be – must be – made into an (arbitrary) measure in terms of which the present may be understood and judged" [*Inflections*, pp. 12–13].

In *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, McGann notes "a hypnotic fascination with the isolated author has served to foster an overdetermined concept of authorship, but (reciprocally) an underdetermined concept of literary work" [p. 122]. He argues that the best text of a poem is not necessarily produced by trying to reconstruct the "author's final intentions." He criticizes, for example, the preference for using as "copy-text" an author's manuscript even when an early edition, together with author-corrected proofs, is available. Traditionally, textual scholars have tried to construct a hypothesized "lost original" for classical or Medieval works whose earliest extant texts date from long periods after the work's composition. Biblical scholars face the most extreme, and metaphorically interesting, case of lost "originals." As a result, the work of textual scholarship has been defined as purifying the corruption and contamination of the "lost original" that has occurred in the process of transmission through publication, expurgation, augmentation, modernization, and previous scholarly editions.

In modern textual criticism the "ideal text" has become a substitute for the "lost original" and the author's holograph documents are taken to be the source for the author's final intentions, even if the writer never imagined that these documents would be reproduced. McGann disputes the notion that publication necessarily contaminates the text. Poetry, insofar as it is published, is a social form and the intersection of the text with social institutions is *part of* the work, not a corruption of it. "Having learned the lesson that authors who wish to make contact with an audience are fated, by laws of information theory, to have their messages more or less seriously garbled in the process, textual critics proposed to place the reader in an unmediated contact with the author. This project is of course manifestly impossible, a Heisenbergian dilemma, since some form of mediation is always occurring, not the least in the editions produced by critical editors of various persuasions. Nevertheless, though everyone today recogizes this inherent limitation on all acts of communication, the idea persists in textual studies that a regression to authorial manuscripts will by itself serve to reduce textual contamination" [p. 41].

McGann argues that the overall effect of much textual criticism is to discount the social and historical dimensions of textual production. Certain writers serve as outer limits to his consideration: Blake's self-published editions and Dickinson's manuscripts were specifically produced outside the customary social nexus of publication; however, their work is now known only insofar as, at some later point, it entered into this nexus. Moreover, the collaborative interaction of writers, friends and colleagues, assistants, proofreaders, editors, publishers, and readers is not inevitably

pernicious. Almost all writers choose to make some sort of collaborative arrangements, as much because of, as in spite of, potential disagreements. "Sometimes these relationships operate smoothly, sometimes the author will struggle against every sort of intervention, and between these two extremes falls every sort of variation . . . 'Final authority' for literary works rests neither with the author nor with his [or her] affiliated institution; it resides in the actual structure of the agreements which these two cooperating authorities reach in specific cases" [pp. 53–54]. The history of publishing is filled with unwarranted and meretricious alterations of a writer's punctuation, spelling, and grammar; such abuses need to be adjudicated on a case-by-case basis. At the same time, the dispute becomes part of the work's meaning, which is suppressed when such problems are resolved, as McGann puts it, in terms of right and wrong rather than "what does this mean?" Ironically, recourse to the ideology of final intentions has often resulted in the circumvention of the writer's actual intentions as expressed by active consent.

The social process of literary production is a constituent component of a work's meaning, not a barrier preventing access to it. In this regard, the visual representation of language—typography and book design—is among the least recognized, and most important, actors in constituting a work's meaning. Furthermore, theories about "ideal texts" do not offer viable methods of resolving problems arising from variant versions of the "same" poem. Variants, McGann points out, arise from different social contexts of publication, changing assumptions about readership, or a poetics that incorporates variants as part of its processes. The contextual nature of variants helps to dispel the illusion that each poem has a perfect and inviolable autonomy that is defamed not only by publisher's changes and printer's mediations but even by author's "errors" and irresolutions. McGann notes that many writers have been more than willing to dismember and revise their poems, leaving open the issue of finalization. In contrast, the reification of the Poem erases the historicity of its composition, that is, its appearance in the world and the forms its past readers have responded to. Reified timelessness is an effect that some poets may wish to create, but, as McGann says, "An author's work possesses autonomy only when it remains an unheard melody" [p. 51]. The theory of final intentions turns out to be thick with Romantic ideology.

Most importantly, McGann argues that just as there is no ideal text of a poem, so there is no ideal—definitive—scholarly edition. Scholarly editions are historical, institutionally motivated, documents; yet the scientism inherent in much textual methodology denies this ideological dimension. The implication of this appeal is not to legitimize unwarranted alterations by publishers and scholars but to bring into the open the dynamics of these, virtually inevitable, interactions. McGann's writing acknowledges the effects that current developments in poetry have on the editing of past

poetry. *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* will seem relevant to readers familiar with Charles Olson's notoriously indeterminate manuscripts; Robert Duncan's and Robert Grenier's insistence on retaining the typewriter grid in their books; any of a number of recent collaborative poems; and the scrupulous or funky self-publications of many writers, ranging from xeroxes of manuscripts with holograph changes to "book art" productions in which the graphic element is foregrounded. McGann's currency will not surprise those familiar with a book he published a baker's dozen years ago, *Swinburne: An Experiment in Criticism.* Cast in the form of a dialogue among a variety of personages who knew Swinburne, the book provides a beautifully realized alternative to the monological voice of critical authority; it also engages many of the questions that have focussed discussions of poetics in the ensuing years.

In advocating a sociohistorical approach to the poem, McGann is as wary of biographic reduction (conceiving of the poem as existing primarily in terms of the poet's life history) as of formalist aestheticization (poems are primarily about other poems or the poetic process). Yet it is important to keep in mind that a well-grounded, scholarly reading of a poem is not the only kind of desirable reading. Many poems thrive on wildly ill-informed readings, as anyone knows who has flipped open a book of older texts and read them without reference to author or date. That a poem may have this kind of resilience is a central fact in *any* reading of it. Thinking of poems as *texts* is liberating because it locates their object status within the generic democracy of the written—*a piece of writing*; it undercuts the Romantic aura of the Poem while allowing for an exhilaration in the wordness of all writing. Poems are not necessarily diminished (*or illuminated*) by specialized (partisan, tendentious) readings—Marxist, psychoanalytic, biographic, structural, formal, bibliographic. The problem arises when such readings claim for themselves priority or exclusivity, that is, deny their sociohistorical and ideological character; which, of course, they so often do. Indeed, it was the hegemony of proprietary readings of literature—fixed meanings *executed* by authors and embalmed by textual science—that led Roland Barthes to renounce the notion of the *work* (that which can be "held in the hand") in favor of that polymorphous, heterogenous, decentered, unauthorized, plural "methodological field" that is the *Text.** McGann's work is polemical because he does not ameliorate the dispute between "Dryasdust" philologists and "Skimpole" deconstructionists, as he labels them. On the contrary, he wishes to bring into the

*See Barthes's 1971 essay, "From Work to Text" in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josue V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) and "Shall These Bones Live" in *The Beauty of Inflections.*

open a conflict both sides have chosen to ignore by proceeding, uncontested, on their own *falsely* separate paths. McGann's historical program, paradoxically, supplements, rather than supplants, Barthes's critique (as is apparent in his considerations of "final authority"). Like Marx's critique of Hegel, he wishes to turn Barthes's dialectic on its head, not revert to the state of affairs that led Barthes to write his essay.

There is no key that unlocks the mystery of how or what or why a poem means or becomes. All readings are partial and distorting, though some more than others; there are many virtues in excess, even if this excess effectively annihilates the object of reference. McGann's view is more sobering, less ludic. He insists that we pay a high price for such transgressions, that they threaten our ability to learn what history teaches. The implicit analogy is to our relations with one another, where a moral distinction can be made between projection and understanding; response based on projection is a form of denial, on understanding a sign of acknowledgment.

McGann's project is not to curtail the proliferation of approaches to reading, or writing, but rather to ground them. I think it is something like that he means by choosing as the epigraph to his most *Textual* work some lines from Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

> I do not know which to prefer,
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

REPORT FROM THE BESIEGED CITY
Zbigniew Herbert
trans. by John and Bogdana Carpenter
Ecco Press, 82 pp., $12.50

W.H. Auden once devoted some pages to the question of the translatability of the Greek poet Cavafy, concluding finally that because his poetry "speaks" rather than sings, and because his vision of the world was so unique that it transcended the confines of his immediate cultural background, some success was possible. I suspect that the same is true,

for like reasons, of our Polish contemporary Zbigniew Herbert. And, indeed, his translators, Czeslaw Milosz among them, have testified to the *relative* amenability of his poetry to that "carrying across the threshold." They acknowledge that his tonal shifts are subtle, and that the structural mapping between English and Polish is problematic, but it appears that these liablities are compensated by the linearity of Herbert's thought and by what is sometimes called the "classicism" of his style – there are no gusts of moodiness or emotionalism in his work.

I would like to keep Cavafy's name up front for a moment, for a further instancing of similarities may be instructive. Here are two separate excerpts:

> I'm practically broke and homeless.
> This fatal city, Antioch
> has devoured all my money:
> this fatal city with its extravagant life.
>
> But I'm young and extremely healthy.
> Prodigious master of Greek,
> I know Aristotle and Plato through and through,
> poets, orators, or anyone else you could mention.
> I have some idea about military matters
> and friends among the senior mercenaries.

and:

> I received a many-sided education
> Livy the rhetoricians philosophers
> I spoke Greek like an Athenian
> although Plato I recalled
> only in the lying position
>
> I completed my studies
> in dockside taverns and brothels
> those unwritten dictionaries of vulgar Latin
> bottomless treasuries of crime and lust

The first citation is from Cavafy's "To Have Taken the Trouble" (trans. by Keeley and Sherrard), and the second is from Herbert's "The Divine Claudius," from the recently-published collection REPORT FROM THE BESIEGED CITY. I find more in common between the passages than the pronomial mask or the classical reference. The two are on a stylistic continuum, presenting historical material in an unadorned manner that is at once intimate and detached. Translation has, of course, skimmed away the rich particularities of each mother tongue – the distance between Greek and Polish sounds is surely great – but it has disclosed all the more clearly a correspondence of vision.

I don't wish to press the Cavafy comparison too far. But as Cavafy's

stance and tone and procedure of historical distancing are well known to readers of modern poetry, he can serve as a useful point of reference. The appearance of similar elements in Herbert's poetry cannot but raise some interesting questions. After all, Cavafy was writing about memory and about the slow decay of civilization—elegaic subjects. Herbert has situated himself in the heart of the "besieged city" that is Poland—refusing exile—and in his eyes slow decay might almost look like a utopian ideal. We have to ask: what kind of response does his poetic mode offer to a morally intolerable reality?

REPORT FROM THE BESIEGED CITY offers three kinds of poems: those written about, or from behind the mask of, historical personages (Beethoven, Isadora Duncan, the Emperor Claudius, the mythical Procrustes) or about historical events; topical or philosophical meditations; and poems spoken through the persona of his creation, "Mr. Cogito," who comes across as a line-sketch caricature of an alienated intellectual of our times. The separation between kinds of poems is not clear-cut. For Mr. Cogito—and fully a fourth of the poems are in his voice—does a good bit of philosophical speculating, and history turns out to be one of his favorite subjects. The real continuity element, however, is tonal. The poems are, almost without exception, refracted through the complex crystal of irony:

for a long time
the conviction persisted
man carries in himself
a sizable reservoir of blood

a squat barrel
twenty-odd liters
—a trifle

—from "Mr. Cogito Thinks About Blood"

I live now
in the best hotel

the dead porter
remains on duty in his room

from a hill of rubble
I enter directly
onto the second floor
to the suite
of the former mistress
of the former chief of police

—from "The Abandoned"

Irony of this sort is not so much a stylistic manoeuver as a mode of consciousness. It is not part of the register of American poetry (only Weldon Kees comes to mind as an exception)—perhaps we don't, collectively, have enough defeat behind us to generate it—and deserves some discussion. To begin with, we should get rid of the idea that its thrust is cynical or destructive. While it does represent the far—experienced—side of idealism, the ironic mode yet retains a connection to that idealism. It is resistance, not capitulation. The ironist protects against the erosion of all faith by inoculating himself with the serum of disillusionment. He never speaks of important things directly; he knows that the public disclosure of emotions or convictions destroys their fragile integrity—and in the modern age all truths are fragile.

If we look to the etymology of the word "irony," we come upon a telling paradox, at least with respect to Herbert's poetry. For the original Greek sense of the word was "dissembling"; to be ironic was to hold back, to refrain from speaking real thoughts, to be untrustworthy. But Herbert's consistently ironic poetry has been widely regarded as an instrument of sanity, a refusal of compromise, a bearing of witness. It would seem that a great deal has changed, either in the word or in the world, since the early period of usage. I would argue that Herbert's irony achieves its exemplary status because of a momentous historical inversion—because, in his part of the world, "polis" has become "police." The political order out of which—and of which—Herbert writes represents a willful deception so thorough that any flat assertion would be neutralized. You do not say of a barbaric deed: "That is barbaric"; to be more effective, to reach past the defenses of your auditors, you whisper: "That was lovely, most refined." Tone, then, becomes content; and tone is much more difficult to legislate. Irony represents, in a society like Herbert's, a language apart. Oblique, encoded, quarantined against rhetoric, it is the signature of a secret brotherhood, a covert emblem of truth. What is so frightening about reading Herbert's poetry is the realization that things have come to such a pass.

Herbert achieves a great many different kinds of ironic effects, and I only have space to note a few. In the poem "Mr. Cogito on the Need for Precision," for example, he manipulates the discrepancy between subject and tone masterfully. Here, in the middle of the second section, he uses a conventional tactic of understatement to set up his point:

> A few simple examples
> from the accounting of victims
>
> in an airplane disaster
> it is easy to establish
> the exact number of the dead

important for heirs
and those plunged in grief
for insurance companies

But then, in the third section, he suddenly complicates things by taking up the issue of "those who perished/in the struggle with inhuman power":

accidental observers
give doubtful figures
accompanied by the shameful
word "about"

and yet in these matters
accuracy is essential
we must not be wrong
even by a simple one

we are despite everything
the guardians of our brothers

ignorance about those who have disappeared
undermines the reality of the world

The shift is clearly discernible. The second passage is frontal and eschews the primer-like tone of the "airplane disaster" lines. And yet the undercurrent of irony cannot be shaken. Serious as this later passage sounds, the cool sobriety is still at odds with the essential reality invoked. The fact that it is the 2-dimensional Mr. Cogito who speaks further heightens the dissonance. We end up heeding – and surely this is Herbert's design – the detachment of Mr. Cogito's thought as much as the substance of it. The tension between the *how* of presentation and the *what* of real lives maps in miniature the enormous struggle between totalitarian (or, for that matter, *any*) bureaucracy and the heart's desire that every hair be numbered.

Historical subject matter supplies Herbert with other tonal options. Like Cavafy, he turns to his own poetic advantage the obliterating effects of time. The events and personages that he seizes upon have already been cleansed of subjective particularity; little more than the bare lines of narrative remain. This is a calculated operation on Herbert's part. For by choosing thus to address the past, he effects a powerful reversal. The bleached bones of history show us more than the past – they reveal implicitly the future's rudimentary image of the present. Oppressor and oppressed will suffer equal oblivion – not a consoling vision, even though it represents a relative gain for the latter. For me this accounts for much of the bitter taste of a poem like "Anabasis." Its irony – produced by the flat, retrospective generalizations – sends a shudder through the historian's time-line:

The condotierri of Cyrus a foreign legion
cunning pitiless and yes they killed
two hundred and fifteen daily marches
—kill us we can't go any further—
thirty-four thousand two hundred and fifty-five stadia

festering with sleeplessness they went through savage countries
uncertain fords mountain passes in snow and salty plateaus
cutting their road in the living body of peoples
luckily they didn't lie they were defending civilization

the famous shout on Mount Teches
is mistakenly interpreted by sentimental poets
they simply found the sea that is the exit from the dungeon

they made the journey without the Bible without prophets burning bushes
without signs on the earth without signs in the sky
with the cruel consciousness that life is immense

Herbert's principal devices—tonal displacement and detached historical vision—are brought together in the powerful title poem, which is placed at the end of the book. The unnamed reporter/witness is situated in the "besieged city"; the time of the events is not specified. This last turns out to be an important strategic element. For at the beginning we locate ourselves in a near-mythic long-ago (much as we do in Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"):

Too old to carry arms and fight like the others—

they graciously gave me the inferior role of chronicler
I record—I don't know for whom—the history of the siege

But we are not allowed to hold that comforting scrim in place for long. By the half-way mark a more disturbing resonance has been created:

and so in the evening released from facts I can think
about distant ancient matters for example our
friends beyond the sea I know they sincerely sympathize
they send us flour lard sacks of comfort and good advice
they don't even know their fathers betrayed us
our former allies at the time of the second Apocalypse
their sons are blameless they deserve our gratitude therefore we are
grateful
they have not experienced a siege as long as eternity
those struck by misfortune are always alone
the defenders of the Dalai Lama the Kurds the Afghan mountaineers

And then comes the devastating conclusion:

cemeteries grow larger the number of defenders is smaller
yet the defense continues it will continue to the end
and if the City falls but a single man escapes
he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile
he will be the City
we look in the face of hunger the face of fire face of death

worst of all – the face of betrayal

and only our dreams have not been humiliated

We have not the slightest doubt that Herbert is speaking to us out of the present, but the deliberately non-specific opening section calls together the various historical tableaux that have preceded it in the book. The rays from vanished civilizations converge upon the point of the *now*. In that now, the City still lives; its invisible life is sustained in the hearts of loyal countrymen. But what will the next generation have to hold up against the "face of betrayal"?

"Too long a sacrifice," wrote Yeats, "can make a stone of the heart." The master ironist would appear to undermine this process by taking into his soul something of the hardness of the stone. But that armor must not be construed as callous resignation – behind Herbert's tonal facade is a man cupping his hands around a flickering match.

SVEN BIRKERTS

NOTES ON RECENT PUBLICATIONS

Robert von Hallberg's study of *American Poetry and Culture 1945–1980* (Harvard) is somewhat willful and too concessionary to too many diverse interest-groups (there's actually a chapter on "tourist poems"), but it has the advantage of being the best-informed book (in both an historical and sociological sense) of any general treatment of postwar American poetry yet written. Charles Susskind's delightful chronicle *Janacek and Brod* (Yale) reveals the extent of the Czech composer's good fortune in having Max Brod as translator and exponent during his late creative florescence. Milton J. Bates' *Wallace Stevens* (U. of California) covers the whole life, but makes the final "alterstil" summation uniquely credible as a psychological, not merely a literary, culmination. The cause of Vladimir Holan is admirably served by a selected poems, *Mirroring* (Wesleyan) which usefully emphasizes some of the longer poems that serve as bridges between the huge beacon of "A Night With Hamlet" and the elliptical glitter of tiny poems

that make up most of Holan's work. The superlative translation by Sjöberg and Rukeyser of Gunnar Ekelöf's book-length poem *A Mölna Elegy* is finally available in two handsome volumes (one English, one Swedish) from Unicorn Press. Some other notable translations: Anna Akhmatova in D.M. Thomas' renderings (*You Will Hear Thunder*, Ohio Univ.) comes off as one of the unmistakably central figures of the century. The first installment of Paul Schmidt's complete translation of Velimir Khlebnikov, *The King of Time* (Harvard) is as diverse and satisfying as anyone could hope for, including poems, fantastical speculations on the future, and culminating in the esoteric gematria of "The Tables of Destiny" and the poem-tableaux scenic marvel "Zangezi: A Supersaga in Twenty Planes." *Visions of Excess* by Georges Bataille (Univ. of Minnesota) presents shorter pieces like "The Solar Anus," "The Pineal Eye" and "The Obelisk" from 1927 to 1939 that place him historically and temperamentally with Artaud at the limits of articulable thought and biological revelation. A stunning presentation. Another commendable compilation is the poetry and hermetic tracts of O.V. de L. Milosz in good translations (some by Rexroth) filling almost 500 pages as *The Noble Traveller* (Lindisfarne). Czeslaw Milosz provides a sizeable introduction, while his own quasi-autobiographical *The Land of Ulro* reaches even more alluringly into the hidden legacy of his ancestor. Turning to poetry titles . . . The extravagant riches of Jackson Mac Low's procedural imagination have never been better served – or more promptly available – than in *From Pearl Harbor Day to FDR's Birthday* (Sun & Moon), *The Virginia Woolf Poems* (Burning Deck) and especially *Bloomsday* (Station Hill), a blazing Protean compendium of the man's wit and resourcefulness. With *Tottering State* (The Figures) the evidence is abundant: Tom Raworth is a poet whose originality continually manifests itself in ways that pose questions to the whole enterprise of (1) writing poetry and (2) using language as a tool for thought. A major selection from 20 years' work. A crazy irony it is that some of California's most notable poets are being published in Rhode Island! Three books by Burning Deck: Ron Silliman's *Paradise*, the latest addition to a body of work so exact in detailing inner city life that it might have a bright future as sociological document (to say nothing of its aesthetic and methodological interest). In Rae Armantrout's *Precedence* there's nothing in excess, her careful articulation of clear seeing and sound common sense is, as ever, a refreshing antidote to the bombast that infects most American attempts at seriousness. *The Landing of Rochambeau* by Michael Davidson jettisons the post-structural anxieties evident in *The Prose of Fact*, returning to the promise of *The Mutabilities* with its consistently good-humored philosophical boisterousness. The terse, spare, mostly untitled poems of Dennis Phillips' *The Hero Is Nothing* (Kajun Press) maintain a spirit of genuine enigma; the sense of disorientation that accompanies the reading of them is periodically relieved by alluring signs of personali-

ty, subtle tints and shades constituting a kind of embryological evidence that excites the same alertness as the recognition of a sentence or a figure on some prehistoric shard. To round this out: Dennis Johnson's novel *Fiskadoro* (Knopf) is a most original and almost desperately fertile piece of imaginative writing. And no reader of SULFUR should miss James Hillman's *The Thought of the Heart* (Spring), a high point in a career of embarrassing riches.

JED RASULA

LEON GOLUB: Existentialist/Activist Painter
DONALD KUSPIT
Rutgers University Press

In his Introduction, Donald Kuspit proposes "that Golub posits no possibility of peace between the witnessing avant-garde individual and brutal society, which does not want its raw reality preserved for posterity in art; it wants only its better side to be visible to eternity, and it expects art to serve that lie." The tone of the remark sounds all too familiar at first. Since the middle 1940's, American critics have been proposing that the strongest artists of each succeeding generation find ways to challenge society. Kuspit's stance, however, is significantly different than the ones taken by such Modernist critics as Clement Greenberg, Robert Rosenblum, and Michael Fried. In contrast to these critics and their heirs, Kuspit takes into account Theodor Adorno's conviction that it is impossible to make art after Auschwitz. In his attempt to undermine Adorno's conviction with an analysis of an art that he believes is "imaginatively responsive and responsible to the modern age," Kuspit knows he must evolve a critical discourse that locates the artist within larger realms, such as society and tradition, address his intentions, motives, decisions, influences, and results. Rather than being retrospective in his approach, he must become introspective. It is to his credit that the writing becomes neither a chronological series of esthetic evaluations, nor a turgid set of pseudo-insights.

Beyond rooting itself in the belief that most contemporary notions of the avant-garde have degenerated into notions of esthetic revolution, Kuspit's essay argues that Golub's work—its implicit critique of our received ideas of what constitutes radical art—is a confrontation to be reckoned with. By locating Golub in both the tradition of Western art and today's technological landscape, while analyzing his activist attempt to address these divergent realms simultaneously, Kuspit's essay covers a very different ground than the ones found in William Rubin's 1969

monograph on Frank Stella, say, or Roberta Smith's recent monograph on Jennifer Bartlett's painting, *Rhapsody*. Consequently, this essay should be read by anyone who is interested in the ongoing debates among critics of contemporary art, particularly as the argument centers around Modernism's utopian premise and Post-Modernism's severe disillusionments.

As Kuspit sees it, this Post-Modern moment should not be characterized as a series of esthetic responses to the Modernist epoch. To do so would be to continue the Formalist attitudes of Clement Greenberg in some convoluted, perverse fashion. In order to fashion his approach to Golub's deeply pessimistic vision, Kuspit employs writing from such disciplines as philosophy, Post-Freudian psychology, art history, literary criticism, and sociology. He quotes from Adorno, Nietzsche, Artaud, Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot, Kenneth Burke, and Oswald Spengler, among others. The result: a flexible critical discourse that is used to speculate, probe, analyze, criticize, argue, and deconstruct. The ultimate aim is to see the work in the largest context possible, that of society.

Kuspit divides his essay into four chapters: the Classical/Contemporary Dialectic of Identity, Measuring the Immeasurable Past: Examples of Primitive Dream Work, the Existential/Narcissistic Paintings: Becoming an Artist, and The Social Activist Paintings: Masculine and Military Psychology. Each chapter presents a dialectical frame which is used to dissect the different aspects of Golub's artistic identity, his conscious intentions and unconscious results. Hypotheses are tested, analyzed, and countered. The microcosm of the individual always points to the macrocosm of csociety. Questions lead to questions. Each is meant to bring both the author and the reader/viewer closer to the work.

Among the many convincing points that Kuspit reaches is this: "Golub offers us the most primordial art of the postmodern period." He is not, in other words, a political artist. Instead, Kuspit believes that Golub's work addresses the dissolution of the self in the modern world. Certainly, this is something that has been a preoccupation of such radical artists as Chaim Soutine, Willem de Kooning, Frida Kahlo, Philip Guston, Jasper Johns, Malcolm Morley, Robert Morris, Magdalena Abakanowicz, and Ed Paschke. By connecting Golub to a radical tradition, Kuspit not only confronts many of the accepted art historical and critical attitudes, but he also reveals the extent to which they have become outmoded and useless.

Golub's position in the art world is by no means a secure one. Until recently, he received only marginal critical attention and publicity. In recent years, he has reached the peculiar place where people pay lip service to him, but otherwise ignore or misconstrue his art. Ironically enough, this ignorance is boldly announced on the dust jacket's inside flap, where Patterson Sims, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, writes: "Located between Ben Shahn and street art, Golub occupies, especially given his Chicago background, a special place in post-1950 American

art. . . . He unquestionably offers a wonderful prism through which to view this period." Sims makes Golub's art turn back to the art world. His choice of "prism" is an apt metaphor for the way most museums have responded to the work. Of the 150 or so paintings reproduced in this catalog, I found only 5 which belonged to a museum collection. None of them were in New York.

Patterson Sims is one of many who uphold the lie. Leon Golub and Donald Kuspit do not. Golub examines the dark, brutal side of contemporary life. His *Mercenaries*, *White Squads*, and *Interrogations* are a searing confrontation with America's global presence. Like Eugene Smith's photographs of Minimata and the effects of mercury poisoning, Golub's paintings do not condemn so much as implicate. It is one of the reasons why so many prefer to dismiss Golub's deeply committed Realist vision. Kuspit's monograph is not only a thoughtful, thought provoking response to Golub's work it is also a major contribution to contemporary art criticism.

JOHN YAU

THE MEANING OF INDIGENOUS IN VALLEJO

In the mature poetry of César Vallejo – that poetry written in Europe between 1923 and 1938 – there is an extraordinary assimilation of his background, to the extent that the phrase "indigenous influence" is internalized and revealed only obliquely. Of the 110 poems that Vallejo appears to have written in Europe, only a handful deal directly with Peru, and in these poems there is no folklore, no political argument, no Quechua or Incan nostalgia – in short, no reliance on the thematic concerns that "third world" or "minority voice" poets often utilize to raise before a reader's eyes what has been outcast.

One is tempted to say that when Vallejo physically left Peru in 1923, he also abandoned it as a psychic reservoir of his art. His geographical movement, with Paris as a base, includes Russia and Spain, and terminates with his adherence to a socialist art, stirred by the Spanish Civil War. Such a viewpoint, however, would miss the most important aspects of Vallejo's European poetry since for the most part it is not concerned with place, subject matter, or theme, and cannot be evaluated on the basis of how many times Peruvian themes appear or do not appear. I would propose that there is an Indian interiority to many of these poems. Their im-

penetrableness and remoteness is not merely experimental obscurity, but a rendering of sierra "cholo" character, a translation of a personality rooted in Chimu Indian grandmothers and Spanish-Galician-priest grandfathers into poetry that does not explain or even address choloness, but embeds its austerity, anxiety, and immutability into the Spanish language.

Unfortunately, the indigenous quality I am trying to address in this paper* is even more complicated than I propose. By the time the majority of the European poems were written, Vallejo had been in Europe for nearly 15 years. By the fall of 1937, he had, in effect, passed through Europe, and his poems, which use his own anatomy as studied place, present us with a body that contains the bits and pieces of Western social and religious culture that he had not been able to assimilate. The labor of processing Marxism and Christianity presents him with so many unsolvable problems that it reshapes the way he presents his own dualistic background. On one hand, he is a kind of Congo Nkonde figure, studded with mirrors, nails and hard blades, a Peruvian Nkonde whose magical body juts and glints with European detritus. On the other hand, I think of his poetry as sculpted stone: running my hands across its contours, I feel a seamless, quiet, ecstatic *anguish*.

His dualistic background seems to be sounded by the two Spanish verbs, "estar" and "ser." Vallejo himself pairs these verbs, suggesting that together they indicate a totality of being, with "estar" emphasizing anonymous being, and "ser" emphasizing individuated being. In an attempt to explain Vallejo, one might be tempted to interpret "estar" as passive Indian existence, and "ser" as active European being, but to do so aligns and simplifies two forces that are both static *and* dynamic in this poetry. If they suggest any alignment at all, it is a yin/yang mandala, a kind of animal/human mask, vertically split, with the flesh of one side made translucent in the eye of the other side.

Anonymous being, in Vallejo, is animal being, and he associates a particular category of animals – jackasses, asses, and donkeys, all beasts of burden – with Peru itself. He begins one poem: "It was Sunday in the clear ears of my jackass, / my Peruvian jackass in Peru." His finest thematically-indigenous poem, "Telluric and magnetic," is populated with pachyderms, rodents, vicuñas, asses, apes and guinea-pigs. While there is a sardonic edge to the image of man as a "gloomy mammal" who "combs his hair," the animal emphasis is on grounded, generational life, a magnetic adherence to biological perpetuation. This is the closest we come to

*This paper, and Nathaniel Tarn's paper on Neruda, were read at the New Latin American Poetry Conference, organized by Frank Graziano, at Durango, Colorado, October 18–20, 1985.

bedrock in Vallejo's poetry, but it is weeping bedrock, and therefore unstable.

José Carlos Mariátegui pointed out in 1928 that the fundamental Indian characteristic of César Vallejo's early poetry is a "nostaligia of exile, of absence." Mariátegui's point is based on poetry written by Vallejo before he left Peru. By the fall of 1937, having been in actual exile for nearly 15 years, much of which time he lived nomadically out of a suitcase, Vallejo's nostalgic mood had deepened *and* raised into what might be called the climate of his being. Nostalgia is amplified into sadness, weeping, and anguish, none of which directly evoke the Peru of his childhood, or a Peru of a more distant past. This does not mean that Peru is not present. It means that Vallejo is seeking an expression the equal of his own nature's intricacy, that he is blending, beyond racial stratification, his mixed background into a composite image of man.

The crying/sobbing/weeping is especially interesting, as it is one of the most constant currents in these poems, and is rendered more complexly than mere loss or frustration. Vallejo speaks of his "beloved organs for crying," he desires to "anoint his body with wept honey," and urges the reader to join him in a banquet that consists of "the flesh of sobbing, the fruit of groaning." Given these positive associations with tears, one is hardly surprised when in a late poem he commands man to "give off rain." Tears, or the body's miraculous liquids, become a kind of fecundation, a way of brimming with the world.

Another current, one that is curiously related to tears and masculine fluids, as well as to the way Vallejo is expressing his Peruvianism, is that of generational consternation, specifically a vexation with his own genitality that appears to be related to the fact that the Vallejos never had any children (Vallejo himself being the youngest of 12). While I do not want to leave the poetry for rumination on César Vallejo's yet-to-be-written European biography, I want to point out that I, as well as others, have been told by old friends of the poet who were still alive in Paris in the 60s and 70s, that Georgette Vallejo had anywhere from several to over a dozen abortions. One of the fractured motifs that runs through these poems and which seems to agonizingly press the poet up against the meaninglessness of his death, is a stated love for the human family and a consequen nightmare assembly of images coupling masculine sexual desire with complications, morbidity and abortion in the feminine or receptive sphere.

I spent a year in Peru in 1964–65, most of which time I was in Lima. I made two brief trips to the sierra, east of Ica, and in the Huancayo area, and while I still have strong feelings for the people I saw and met there, I can't say that I understand something fundamental about their world that would throw a definitive beam into the obscurities of César Vallejo. However, having lived with and retranslated these poems since the early 60s, I have feelings about the layers of Vallejo's life and the way he manages

to keep me active as a reader/translator by particular focuses and deflections. In one of the notebooks he kept in the 1930s, Vallejo remarked that he loved plants for their roots, not for their flowers. My image of the Vallejo plant is one that is rooted in Andean taciturnity. As this plant pushes up through the soil, we are confronted with its struggle to flower, not with the flower itself. In a unique way, the Vallejo plant never does flower, but twists about on itself, a gnarled and branching thing, constricting itself with its own off-shoots.

Generation is forced up into view on all levels and held in the poetry in a state of anguished suspension. I think that were Vallejo to have been European or North American he would have chosen one of two other alternatives: to either openly acknowledge the problem and to offer an explanation for its cause – or to repress it, to sublimate its awful energy into a literary attitude. I'm suggesting that there is a triple containment in Vallejo's European poetry, based on a humanized Christian trinity, in which the Mother replaces the Holy Ghost. This triple containment consists of tears, stones, and the blocked generational drive which is linguistic as well as organic. Triads are everywhere in these poems, such as "my potato and my flesh and my contradiction under the bedsheet."

Over the years I have had the haunting but unverifiable feeling that these poems were loaded with Andean reluctance to communicate, initially with the Peruvian coastal world and ultimately with Europe – moreover, that Vallejo was bearing Indian muteness in his art, and that "indigenous influence" here indicates the translation of "outer" experience into an unceasing internal pregnancy, a relentless bearing within, that is presented without source or realization.

I have spoken of the tears and of Vallejo's sexual morbidity which, I should add, because of the courage involved in expressing it, is moving, and affirmative. The stones are what Vallejo carried with him to Paris, the Andean particles that he could have put in his pocket. The stone is an indication of cosmic instability, for he writes: "do not put your foot on that tiny stone: who knows, it is not a stone, and you'll plunge into empty space, for we are in a totally inknown world." Note that he writes "inconocido" here, not "desconocido," an *in*known, not an *un*known world. He portrays himself (in black overcoat) as a "black stone on a white stone," and in the poem compelled by a hunger that is both biological and spiritual, the craving is for:

> A stone to sit down on
> will now be denied to me?
> Not even that stone on which the woman trips who has given birth,
> the mother of the lamb, the cause, the root,
> that one will now be denied to me?
> At least that other one,
> that crouching has passed through my soul!

At least
the calcarid or the evil one (humble ocean)
or the one no longer even worth throwing at man,
that one give it to me now!

At least the one they could have found lying across and alone in
an insult,
that one give it to me now!
At least the twisted and crowned, on which echoes
only once the walk of moral rectitude,
or, at least, that other one, that flung in dignified curve,
will drop by itself,
acting as a true core,
that one give it to me now!

In a way, the stone is the unborn child, a lithopaedion of weeping, a consternation in the depth of man that is seldom expressed in art: the consternation of not being able to bring forth life—art as a substitute for offspring. I believe that the trinity of forces I have proposed is a basic configuration in Vallejo's European poetry and that it represents a combined object too, that each force mirrors the others. Yet they do not add up to an intellectual house of mirrors. They are muscles of the work, as well as clues.

There are a handful of poems that do deal directly with Peru, as if Vallejo continues to keep a siphon into his natal source no matter where he wanders. In one such poem he extols Peruvian miners in a way that makes them seem like archetypal forces emerging each evening from the abyss they deepen each day. Another poem affirms the connections between the speech, labor, and physicality of landless Peruvian serfs. The summation piece on Peru is the blistering "Telluric and magnetic," in which Vallejo affirms his allegiance to the biological and zoological combustion of a Peruvian earth that is forever in parthenogenesis, where he catches slopes red-handed in becoming slopes. "Telluric and magnetic," in one blow, rivets Vallejo's entire European production to the Andean/Indian aspect of his life, as if at the bottom of his cosmic well the gleams of intelligibility are the eyes of an Indian—or is it a vicuña?—gazing through the blackness. Or to see it another way: as if he is capable of letting the storms of history and personal consternation howl through his poetry because of an inherited Indian endurance that still reverberates with the creation of the earth itself. "Indian later than man and before him!" he shouts near the end of "Telluric and magnetic," thus embracing or surrounding man with Indianness, as well as seeing man as a transitional stage between the primordial and the new, whereby the primordial again appears, recycled and strengthened by the transition.

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN

To make some sense of this in only fifteen minutes, I'll concentrate on the first sections of *Canto General.* This was written on Neruda's return from the Spanish Civil War at the height of his commitment to the Communist Party of Chile. Personal, poetic and political pressures conspire to structure a fascinating set of contradictions in Neruda's project. Looking at these from the point of view of Ethnopoetics may be suggestive and even useful for us now. I can group my hunches, and they are little more than that, under three paragraphs.

A) Neruda is Spanish in culture, but the root of enablement he requires is Indian. I am far from being a Neruda scholar but in virtually nothing I have come across is Neruda's ethnographic environment looked at in any detail or with any precision. The Chilean scene is not as massively and obviously Indian as are Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador (c.f., in Mesoamerica: Chiapas; Yucatan and Guatemalan Indian versus "Mestizo" or "White" Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica etc.). Brand, around 1941, estimates Central Chilean population at 10% Indian; 25% White; 65% Mestizo. In hard fact, most everyone is biologically mixed: "Indian"/"Non-Indian" categories are mostly determined by cultural, political and economic self-definition – as is the case, indeed, in Mesoamerica.

The Indians of Central Chile are the Araucanians who call themselves *che* (people); *re-che* (real people) or, now, using the name of one subgroup: *Mapu-che* (people of the land). Those of North Central Chile (Rio Aconcagua – Rio Bio Bio) were invaded by the Peruvian Inca around 1450 and Incaisized. Around 1550, Spain replaces all of this. Neruda is born in Parral, inside this area.

But he is taken almost immediately to Temuco in South Central Chile (Rio Bio Bio – Island of Chiloé). This is an area of extremely heavy rainforest, with wood as a major industry. The forest Araucanians here were extremely fierce and blocked both the Inca and the Spaniards for centuries. In 1877, they were finally placed on reservations. Reservation acculturation and politics have determined them ever since: a case which has drawn comparisons with our own Southwest. In sum, these people were fairly simple hunting, fishing and gathering tribes with adaptation to Andean civilization in material culture and crafts while social, political and religious life remain close to early patterns (one example: the predominance of shamanism rather than an evolution of priestly castes on the Inca model).

In Temuco, Neruda could see Indians, especially in the market. It is hard to say how distinctive they were. Most sources talk of wholesale adoption of European dress though you can find photos of the 1920s showing women's dress of an Andine appearance. Silver jewelry became ever more highly developed (again an echo of our Southwest). Country In-

dians used Temuco as an economic and politico-legal central town. Anthropologists disagree. In 1951, Titiev, (who worked at Hopi) sees reservation Mapuche as virtually indistinguishable from Mestizos. Faron, in 1961, regards them as an internal colony of Chile, having preserved many distinctive ethnic characteristics (patrilineal-based political activity and ceremonialism; belief in their own gods and spirits; witchcraft and shamanism; many crafts, etc.). This does happen among anthropologists: if you look for cultural continuity you find it; if you look for discontinuity, you can find that too![1]

But Neruda may not have looked as closely as Faron did. I get no sense of a strong interest or personal concern, on Neruda's part, for Indianity as such.

In "*La Lampara en la Tierra,*" section one of *Canto General,* the Indian, if he emerges at all, tends to do so generically as "el hombre" (man); "el pobre" (the poor); "el pueblo" (the people). Later, in *The Heights of Macchu Picchu,* he comes as "el antiguo ser" (the ancient being); "el servidor" (the servant/slave); "el dormido" (the sleeper) and, of course, as "hermano" (brother). Indianity strikes me as adjectival in Neruda, if it is at all, rather than substantive: "Yo, Incásico del légamo"; "entre flores zapotecas"; "la dulzura cibcha" and so forth.

The section "*Los hombres*" is a totalization composed of a series of vignettes: the men of the islands; the Tarahumara; the Aztecs; the Maya; the Tarascans and the Araucanians (standing for Chile). In between, as if Neruda were more comfortable with matter than with men (an impression not infrequently created by his work): Chichen Itza; Macchu Picchu; Cuzco. The elements of the totalization seem to be selected without any demanding sense of organization, almost lackadaisically, and do not persuade. me.

In fact, Neruda's interest is far more geographic than ethnographic. The work begins with a kind of seven-day genesis: "*Amor America*"; "*Vegetaciones*"; "*Algunas Bestias*" and so on: his triggers are nature, the land, the rain, the forest, timber—not man. His ethnography as such is almost bathetic. When man, Indian man, appears we almost have anticlimax. We have to await the *conquistadores* who *do* arouse his ire and his inspiration.

B) I derive a few propositions from all this: as always, they need testing.

1) As Monegal points out, Neruda—mostly unconsciously perhaps—identifies with an indigenous mother figure, "mi madre araucana" (my Araucanian mother), opposed to a Hispanic, conquering father figure (who can, however, modulate into an oppressed Mestizo worker).[2] I believe, however, that the mother moves south—from Parral to Temuco—into Indian *land,* not into Indianity as such. Neruda is inspired by the south:

it is southern geography, not ethnography, which triggers him. He worked hard to move himself into a brotherly position vis à vis the Indian, but the hard work shows. For instance: against evidence that most ethnic admixture derived from the union of Spanish men and Indian women, Neruda argues that Chileans are born of Araucanian men and Spanish women. He is in direct contradiction with himself and his mythical Indian mother.[3]

2) Neruda is a Chilean but his Indians are not as symbolically visible as the Andine Inca are. This might have provided one good reason for him to jump as he did from an original project of a *Canto General de Chile* to a *Canto General (de America).*

But, there is a further problem. The Araucanians were mortal enemies of the Inca. Also, incidentally, the Inca were feudal and could have been criticized for imperialism (as nothing is simple, note in passing that some have argued this to be a socialistic kind of "feudalism" . . .). Neruda tends to ignore all this by concentrating not on Indian-Indian conflict but on Indian-Spanish war and, later, on Mestizo-Yanqui exploitation.

Monegal argues that Neruda is so anti-Spanish that he neglects Indian feudalism. This seems unfair: as Pring-Mill points out. In Pring-Mill's reading, only the primitive Caribs and the Araucanians go uncriticized: the "brother" in *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* is, after all, a slave of the Incas.[4] I suppose one could argue, along this line, that *The Heights* are a paean to people like the Araucanians; although I think that the intent of hymning *Inca* Macchu Picchu is pretty clear.

What actually happens, I believe, is more generalized than all this and, politically, very effective. Neruda can use an Indian object (Macchu Picchu) as a "human root," but Indian humanity itself is disregarded in its rich variety and subsumed under the category of "people" or lower classes. For Neruda, in short, "Indio" is "Pueblo" before being "Indio": there is no clearer contrast with Vallejo. We remember that, for many, perhaps most Latin American marxists, Indians should be subsumed under proletariat. This is a Pan American problem: that revolution does not involve continued Indianity when seen, that is, from a non-Indian point of view.

C) The use of the Indian *ruin* of Macchu Picchu was a brilliant intuition for Neruda, a profoundly elegiac and nostalgic poet whose political duty was to look forward and upward.

Not long ago, I wrote a study of the Orpheus myth, especially its back-looking and forward-looking aspects (descent into Hades / return to upper earth and light) as the constitutive, enabling myth of a double process in writing: the *elegiac* looking-back at all previous poems in order to recognize the present poem as poem and the *lyric* push forward and upward of the poem to position it in the lifework sequence or opus.[5] I went on to look at various ways in which archeological ruins so often appear as diacritical indices of the elegiac process. Then, I looked at such

ruins in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, contrasting them with Neruda's Macchu Picchu.

The argument was complex. But, briefly and simply, it appears that, symbolically, we go down and backwards to the past; up and forwards to the future. This process can be seen in its orthodox form in the first part of *The Heights*. In the second part, an exciting, heterodox, jolt is generated by the simple ecological fact that Macchu Picchu lies way up in the air. We have a ruined past which is, symbolically (and Neruda makes it into an *arche*, whereas, in fact, it is quite late), the future of all of Latin America. Equally propitious is the transformation of the Eurydice motif into the slave buried under the ruins whom Neruda calls to "arise to birth with me as my own brother." We do not, of course, require that Eurydice should be female: think of Dante-Eurydice fetched by Beatrice-Orpheus through the patroness of music!

Neruda, perhaps, hardly even notices – when he says "I come to speak through your dead mouths" – that his enablement as a poet arises out of the enforced silence of the Indian, an enforcement in which he cannot help participating as a non-Indian. Indians have to have been oppressed, enslaved and killed *in order that* he can speak. As with the rest of us, a useful Indian, alas, is a dead Indian. Or, perhaps, one who has disappeared into the faceless masses: if not genocide, then ethnocide.

Neruda is a good ethnopoet, i.e. one who, as I have come to believe, sees and uses the symbolic value of the Indian root of Americanicity while continuing perforce to dwell in his own non-Indianness. I am not arguing here, need I say it, that not being an Indian makes one an Indian-killer. I am saying that we need to be perpetually on our guard in what we say about the Indian.

Here is a passage from Neruda's "Algo sobre mi Vida y Poesia" (Something about my Life and Poetry), dated 1954:

> I was not able to segregate myself from these buildings. I grasped the fact that, if we trod the same ancestral earth, we had something to do with those high efforts of the American comunity, could not ignore them – and that our doing so, or our silence, was not only a crime but also a continuation of a defeat.
>
> Aristocratic cosmopolitanism had brought us to worship the past of far-off peoples and had bandaged our eyes to prevent us from seeing our own treasures.
>
> I thought of a great deal after my visit to Cuzco (and Macchu Piccu). I thought of ancient American man. I saw his ancient struggles bound up with our own struggles.
>
> That is where my idea of a *Canto General de America* began. Before that, I had persisted in the notion of a *Canto General de Chile* as a chronicle. That visit to Macchu Picchu changed the perspective. Now I saw all of America from the heights of Macchu Picchu. This was the title of the first poem from that new point of view.

The sentiments are worthy. *The Heights* is a marvelous poem. But may not Neruda have been *too* high? "The same ancestral earth"?; "The American community"?; "Our own treasures"?; "His ancient struggles bound up with our own struggles"? Are we that sure? Can Neruda be that sure?

A total identification, à la Whitman, with "my people" is fine but it masks a great deal of conflict and unresolved trouble within that people. First: there has been intra-Indian conflict and this continues. Second: while many Indians are no doubt patriotic citizens, it seems to me we have very far to go before we can take for granted their view of us as belonging to the same people as themselves. Too much of Ethnopoetics has been bound up with the confusion of the geographic and the ethnographic: it is *not* because the non-Indian lives on an Indian continent that he can appropriate Indianity. It is understandable, this search for roots in a new land. We desperately need them. But, whatever we do, there are old roots and new roots. They must not be confused.

NATHANIEL TARN

NOTES

1. See M. Titiev: *Araucanian Culture in Transition*, Occasional Contributions, no. 15; Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1951; and L. C. Faron: *Mapuche Social Structure*, Illinois Studies in Anthropoogy, no. 1, University of Illinois, 1961. Gonzalo Rojas, a major poet also from Central Chile and present at the conference, tells me that Indians can still be distinguished by dress at the Temuco market, although a majority appear to have melted into the crowd. Jewelry goes from strength to strength. Mr. Rojas notes that Neruda's mother "was indubitably Hispanic while his stepmother, the one who really brought him up, could have been perceived more easily as an "Araucanian mother."
2. E. Rodriguez Monegal: *El Viajero Inmovil*, Losada, Buenos Aires, 1966: especially part 3, ch. 7.
3. See an interview with Neruda in Rita Guibert: *Seven Voices*, Knopf, 1973: p. 51.
4. R. Pring-Mill: *Pablo Neruda, A Basic Anthology*, The Dolphin Book Co., Oxford, 1975: especially pp. xxxiii–xxxix.
5. *Archaeology, Elegy, Architecture: a Poet's Program for Lyric*, in Sub-stance, no. 28, Univeristy of Wisconsin, Madison, 1960. N.b.: para. two on p. 13 is badly garbled.

WHY DUCHAMP: AN ESSAY ON AESTHETIC IMPACT
Gianfranco Baruchello & Henry Martin
Documentext/ McPherson & Company

Shortly after Picasso died, the editors of *Art News* sent out a questionnaire asking artists what Picasso meant to them. The answers ranged from pompous to wise guy, and, except for de Kooning and one or two others, no one mentioned if they had used Picasso or not. I begin with this memory, because I have always wondered about the exact impact one artist can have on another.

The subject of influence is a cloudy one. Art historians tend to be both misguided and narrow-minded in their approach, while, understandably enough, artists are reluctant to discuss it. Originality, appropriation, and transformation are among the issues that have to be addressed. Some critics think of influence as a laboratory where one discovers their own authenticity through a trial and error method. Others make it into an Oedipal encounter. Baruchello discusses Duchamp's work and friendship in terms of the permissions they gave him. Distilled from hundreds of hours of conversation with Henry Martin, the book is a wandering monologue in which Baruchello frames these permissions, conveying the essence of what he saw in Duchamp's work, how he has been able to use them. Anecdotes lead to analysis and back again. This is a conversation, not an essay. Baruchello isn't trying to prove a point, he's making one. The book is about *use*: how one artist found a way to use another. He discusses specific works in detail, as well as commenting on the flaws and contradictions he noticed in Duchamp's artist-persona.

Ironically enough, Duchamp's work is so taken for granted these days that it seems almost invisible. His very particular ways of surprising, undermining, and confronting have been transformed into a series of comforting mannerisms. Baruchello's book reminds us of the works' enigmatic presence. He does so by not trying to rationalize or explain it away. He doesn't turn Duchamp into an alchemist. He simply reminds us to look at the work: "The whole constellation of all of these individual gestures he made is so incredibly bizarre. He was the first great master as an impresario of the bizarre, and the possibility he has given us is that we can be just as free-floating too, just as honest and just as inconsistent and with just as much license to do first one thing and then another in an entirely different, even an entirely contradictory direction. You take a bird's cage and go to a marble cutter and have him make imitation sugar cubes and then you put them all together with a squid bone back inside the cage and top it all off with a thermometer and a mirror on the bottom of it and you call it *Why Not Sneeze?* and sign it with a transexual pseudonym. That's the way his whole life might be described, and you can't get more bizarre than that."

Marcel Duchamp is a mythical event in the history of 20th century art. Rather than surrounding him with more stories, Baruchello returns him to earth, where he belongs.

JOHN YAU

Dave Smith, THE ROUNDHOUSE VOICES: Selected and New Poems (NY: Harper & Row, 1985). 182 pp. Paper, $9.95

The Roundhouse Voices is a selection of poems from seven of Smith's eight published collections; toward the close,it adds a few new poems as well. Through it all, a span of fifteen years of writing, one perceives a poet growing up within very narrow limits. His influences are few and obvious: the dense, magical lyrics of James Wright, the swaggering bombast of Dickey at mid-career. Smith does not seem to have read widely or to try his hand at anything much older than 1950s style. He is a creature, by his own admission, of mid-century American culture: the tv, college writing courses, a middle-class accademic life style. His social commentary is nil; he has little interest in things beyond his own childhood, and his style, though at times richly rhetorical and eloquent, is inflexible and of a sameness across the years.

All the same, he is at the center of American poetry now, much honored and respected. His work has garnered the praise of all the moguls of contemporary literature from Helen Vendler to Richard Howard. It would be insensitive to say he is not without gifts as a writer. Indeed, he strings together many difficult, convoluted lyrics that are sustained by a force of clear thrust, a thread of logic that prevents a cluster of intersecting thoughts from turning into a jumble. This is powerful concentration; and he has a font of impressive, unusual metaphors. He is never careless or sloppy; you will not find a poem simply dissolving from lack of point. His grammar is at times a little shaky, which a copy editor should have caught by now, but these are tiny blemishes in what is essentially a pleasant reading experience.

But I wonder if Smith is not in fact more of a creature of his time than he realizes. His poems are best read in magazines, in single doses, where threads and patterns of books are not discernible. He glitters in isolation, in which one is quite moved by the powers of his feelings, his exuberant lyrical digressions, the detailed surface of his memories. Taken together, a weary inertia begins to build up in the reader's concentration,

as though something objectionable were in the lyrics, but too buried under eloquence to be fully grasped. Reading Smith is to be made aware of one's gradual disapproval of his vision of life, and to be pulled along affectionately, wittily, gorgeously by the powers of his speech.

Of the eighty-two poems collected here, one is surprised to find that nearly all of them are about death or childhood sex, in which Smith voices his fear of mortality, his dread of lost innocence. The codification of his experience is very simple: girls are permutations of Eve, assigned to lure boys into manhood. This alone should have inspired any number of thematic expansions to sirens, nymphs, mythic analogs, but Smith hews to a strict image category of Southern girls in weedy marshy trysting places, where their naked legs drape over a boy's back, as he pumps out his last bit of hopeful innocence. Family life is the coil of mortality; Smith is heavy-handed in all of his poems about his own family, the one that raised him, the one in which he is now a parent: they strike him as nothing more than the circle of birth and death in which he is a captive.

Death is everywhere: it begins the book in a prefatory poem, "The Roundhouse Voices," in which he peers down in his uncle's coffin, remembering how he worked in the sooty confines of a roundhouse, and how his uncle taught him baseball when he was a boy. This is clever enough: a roundhouse is the track-end of things, the switcharound, a good metaphor for life turning into death; and baseball is another sort of switching house, home plate being a beginning and an end, an allegorical life-cycle. But these things being tossed off, the real point of the poem is to dread the terms of one's life, the dying that is meaningless to him, the long years of adulthood that lead only to extermination.

Smith's vision is without consolations; he makes memory his only subject, simply because life is a looking back for him, a turning away from death to a magical, though unarticulated state: a boy's innocence, free of the knowledge of death or sexuality, which ends when he succumbs to a girl's inevitable, poisoned seduction. After that, one stumbles into war, a family, and thereafter, years of solitude, of lingering, and then the dying:

> I'm going to die in a scummy ditch
> where love doesn't mean a damn thing.

In a lurid poem about military experience, "Men Drafted," Smith thinks only of the death or dying of young men, horrible to him, and of a urinal where drawings remind him of

> the smell of
> flesh, women swollen, girls
> ripening as they knelt
> to hack the field down,
> to raise it up again.

The word "girl" in Smith's poetry stands for a figure who merely shuttles boys into the death realm; it's their job. They hack them out of their little membraneous eden, and thus it is, that wherever sex is mentioned in this book, even love, there is also the hiss of a snake and the blade of a knife. Even in poems meant to be delicate and affectionate, as in the portraits of his wife, the woman drives her blade into the soft belly of a fish, as Smith looks on in quiet horror.

Smith's landscapes are unconscious depictions of his dread of sexuality; even in his memory of an old boat yard, the puns on female genitals are profuse and toxic:

> You need to ask why they lie cracked, sucking salt
> water through the reed tubes, what has happened
> to shove them back into the center of the marsh . . .
>
> I give you
> this cunner of my place, its hand-hacked bottom whole
> still, smell of crabs yet rank here, a man's hat
> floating in the black water as if mislaid, going down.

"Mislaid, going down." I suspect much of the sexual punning is subconscious in the poetry, though when decoded, it shows a man confused helplessly about sex and life, repeating over and over his bollixed visions. The poetry is very narrow in its thematic range, but the language tirelessly repeats its formulations of sex and knives, scattered flesh on the hills, battered men left broken-hearted by the hiss of seductions. If Smith is a product of mid-century, it tells us the generation was raised without instruction, wisdom, hopes of any kind, only a materialism that in Smith makes rich verse out of very little life.

PAUL CHRISTENSEN

ROMAN JAKOBSON / VERBAL ART, VERBAL SIGN, VERBAL TIME
Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, editors
University of Minnesota Press, 208 pp.

There emerges from this selection of Jakobson's writings a curiously latent, even suppressed, current of his poetics which will without doubt

pressure our readings to articulate the currency of his work. Seen in the succession of these essays is the depth of a particular appeal to coexisting elements in Jakobson's thinking; thus, his invention of a *radical middle ground* which locates the methodological investigation of the linguistic and literary facts in a poem next to the *extraliterary* values which functionally surface within it. Regrettably, discussions of Jakobson have largely effaced the coordination of these parallel dynamics by isolating the singular, invariant face of the methodological picture from what some critics have (mis)perceived as the anomalous, surplus (*extra*literary) phases in the canon. It is, however, precisely these latter signs of poetic origins and impulses, of dominant biographical strains, of private and collective mythologies which inform the dialogue between a writer's life and work. The themes relevant to this particular conjunction underscore five of Jakobson's studies, only one of which—"On a Generation that Squandered its Poets"—is included here. Responding to Majakovskij's suicide in 1930, this essay considers that act "symbolic for the entire generation" (editor's *Preface*). It "isolate[s] the invariant thematic core of Majakovskij's poetry" and directs Jakobson's "thoughts toward the problem of 'poetic myth' " (*Preface*). I will speak more to its substance and implications later.

For now, "the invariant thematic core" of *Jakobson's* research, with its emphasis on the roles of binary models in time, language and literature, should be addressed. Here the "question of invariace in the midst of variation" and the attraction to "binary solutions" dominate ("My Favorite Topics"). Engaging the primacy of binary structures in linguistics and philology, Jakobson's particular concern turns to the integral, dynamic function of time in language and literature. Three essays—"Dialogue on Time in Language and Literature" (Jakobson & Pomorska), "Problems in the Study of Language and Literature" (Jakobson & Tynjanov), "Sign and System of Language: A Reassessment of Saussure's Doctrine" (Jakobson)—deal variously with this issue in the first chapter. Included is Jakobson's re-evaluation of the temporal linguistic model proposed by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*—a representation which opposed language as a system (synchrony) to its historical evolution (diachrony). This breach assigned all developments in language to the diachronic sphere while abandoning the present moment in language to a static fiction. Crediting Saussure for projecting the focus on "the system of language both as a whole and in the relation of each of its constituent parts," Jakobson goes on to reject Saussure's suppression of any link between the system of language and its changes which is considered as the exclusive territory of synchrony, and which authorizes all adjustments to the diachronic field alone. For Jakobson, a linguistic system is perpetually transformed by its changes. System and change are "indissolubly tied . . . The beginning and end of each change are always recognized as such during a period of coexistence in the community" ("Dialogue on Time in Language and Literature").

Thus, obsolete features – archaisms – in a linguistic system are felt concurrently with its latest phases. Emphasis is on the simultaneity of linguistic events – a dynamic, synchronic approach to how language changes, which also insists on the study of invariant or static elements (along with alterations) in the diachronic realm.

Interplay between the two dimensions of time, *simultaneity* and *succession*, marks another distinction between Jakobson and Saussure, who renounces *simultaneity* in favor of what Jakobson calls the "pure linearity" of the *signans*. Jakobson locates the presence of these two dimensional units even on the basic level of the phoneme, which can be broken down into successive and concurrent distinctive features. He extends this idea in order to abandon another of Saussure's principles on rules governing language structure; this in reference to Saussure's reductive dependence on the term "syntagmatic," which describes the "horizontal" combinatorial sequence of linguistic units moving through time (as distinguished from the "paradigmatic" plane, or language's "vertical" relations, i.e., how one unit in a message "responds" to or associates with the total language inventory – the unit's antonyms, synonyms, etc. . . .). Jakobson sees the term as "misleading," since we connect "syntagmatic relations" with "successivity in time" when we must also consider "the combination of simultaneous features . . . in temporal succession." Therefore, we should "speak simply about combination . . . contrasted to selection [substitution], as distinguished from both simultaneity and succession" ("Sign and System of Language").

The discourse on the dynamics of time obviously has multiple implications for a poetics, and Jakobson's intimate alliance with the Russian Cubo-Futurists – Malevich, Majakovskij, Xlebnikov – influenced his research in this area. He notes that his thoughts were inspired by some of their slogans ("Static perception is a fiction") as well as by their impulse to abolish absolutes and vanquish the march of time (progress). Majakovskij, for instance, saw the dissolution of time in a future perfect, a time which, as he said, would "fade from consciousness." In Xlebnikov's work Jakobson sights the problem of the simultaneity, relativity and mutability of time deeply reflected in terms of narrative, in which "simultaneous actions [may be] dispersed in space," or where "the narrator may . . . attribute an inverse order of events to the fictional reality itself. In a Xlebnikov tale the two heroes pass from the ends of their lives to the beginnings but continue to speak of the past and future in the normal and uninverted order of these times" ("Dialogue on Time in Language and Literature").

The flow of time suffuses verse measures as well. Majakovskij foregrounds rhythm as the primary factor in his poetry, while Jakobson sees verse bearing its generative etymological sign of a timely recurrence, where the reader locates the feeling of a present time, looks back at "the

impulse of the preceding verses" and anticipates the creation of future verses. Deviations from the regular recurrences again localize the consistency of Jakobson's total critical approach: variations in light of invariants.

Further issues related to verse design emerge in the second chapter, *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry*, which includes an essay by the same title, "Two Poems by Pushkin" "Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry," "On Poetic Intentions and Linguistic Devices in Poetry" and "Yeats' 'Sorrow of Love' through the Years" (Jakobson and Rudy). These essays manifest Jakobson's dedication to the systematic patterning of grammatical figures and sounds in poetry, which can generate parallelisms of equivalences and contrasts, and shape reality in diverse formal configurations. Rhyme technique – one parallelistic mode – and the poet's grammar are both seen as " 'either grammatical or antigrammatical' but never agrammatical" ("Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry"). Poets either choose a symmetry grounded in a consistent binary pattern or "cope with [these patterns] when longing for an 'organic chaos.' " The grammar at the heart of writing poetry is compared to the geometrical order upon which the composition of painting is based – Apollinaire, before Jakobson, had proposed the same equation – since both superimpose abstract relational patterns upon poetry and painting.

With Jakobson's attention to the functional role of grammar in poetry, an alternative emerges to how, as readers, we have been trained to magnify the appeal to "image" as the sacrosanct ground of verbal art. Jakobson quotes the Russian writer Veresaev confessing the sense of imagery as "a mere counterfeit to genuine poetry." Some of Pushkins's lyrics are seen to exploit the "figure of grammar" (G.M. Hopkins) and abandon the visual tropes. Gertrude Stein, a writer Jakobson does not mention, makes her *Tender Buttons the* exemplary modern text motivated by correspondences among recurring grammatical figures. Her use of prepositions in "A Carafe, That Is A Blind Glass" shatters purely descriptive models of language and draws attention to the composition of the language "picture" itself. (She does not speak to "A kind *of* glass," but "A kind *in* glass" – general noun immersed in concrete noun.) Since prepositions "can of all things be most mistaken" (Stein, *Poetry and Grammar*), Stein uses that mutability to create grammatical parallelisms of contrast (and resemblance) between her *choice* of a particular figure and what she anticipates the reader will substitute for it – response engaging the difference which spreads the reading out. Although not "the juxtaposition of contrasting *grammatical* concepts" (my emphasis), Stein's process is close to the *sense* of the comments made on " 'dynamic cutting' in film montage" (in "Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry"), where "the juxtaposition of contrasting shots or sequences . . . generate in the mind of the spectator ideas that . . . by themselves [they] do not carry."

Stein's (and others') *choice* of a particular figure raises significant ques-

tions as to whether grammatical designs are plotted or instinctual or motivated by chance. Jakobson excludes the chance factor since "it is quite impossible—as any mathematician dealing with probability will tell you—that such an exact distribution of conjunctions and prepositions [as in Yeats' "Sorrow of Love," 1925 version] should be quite fortuitous" ("On Poetic Intentions and Linguistic Devices in Poetry"). Between conscious and subconscious activity Jakobson opts for the primacy of the latter in mapping the poet's discourse, indicating, however, that discovery of the poet's notes often alert us to a grammatically informed mind acute in its perceptions of design. In Serbian folkloric epic poetry Jakobson finds a subliminal grammatical grid pitched to a regular quantitative measure which the singers (*guslars*) of these verses cannot explain, although they are quick to note any violation from the rule once it occurs. Xlebnikov realizes subconscious patterns in his poetry when he discovers that each of four sounds appears five times in the primary sentence of the poem "The Grasshopper," "without," as he confesses, "any wish of the one who wrote this nonsense" (quoted in "Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry").

Evaluation of the role of pattern continues in Jakobson's exhaustive study of Yeats' "Sorrow of Love," in its two versions (1898, 1925). Elements shared by both poems are contrasted to the variant methodological principles underlying each—the gap in time between the composition of the two revealing the changing signature of Yeats' poetics. A beautifully compressed mathematical exposition of the distribution of grammatical categories in both poems shows the 1925 poem to be the more symmetrical of the two, as Jakobson counts the corresponding number of nouns, prenominal attributes, pronouns, connectives, etc., between and within each of the texts. Of particular fascination is the luminous visionary symbolism he applies to "the operative principle regulating the poem's symmetries, [which] is here the number three and its exponents—reflective of Yeats' "Great Wheel" (" 'principle symbol' of the universe") because, as he insisted, " 'each set of three is itself a wheel.' " Thus, the first phase of Yeats' 28 phases is seen as "not being human" (Yeats), "so that three to the third power . . . in fact exhausts the entire human realm" (Jakobson).

In wedding the mechanics of number to the elaboration of an originary cosmology, Jakobson again reveals his attraction to "binary solutions," and this balance is no more evident than in the essays concerning *extraliterary* influences upon texts—"On a Generation that Squandered its Poets" and "The Language of Schizophrenia: Hölderlin's Speech and Poetry" (Jakobson and Grette Lübbe-Grouthes) which follow in the next section, *Poetry and Life*. Writing on Hölderlin, Jakobson undertakes—where others have suppressed or ridiculed the effect of the poet's schizophrenia on his later verse—an objective, structuralist reading of "The View" (the analysis itself is omitted by the editors), resolving that the linguistic system of the poem is perfectly consistent with a type of schizophrenia in which the

capacity for dialogue is eroded. The later poetry is read as antithetical to the earlier texts' commitment to exchange between speakers, and is *organized* around a clearly symmetrical monologic competence (lacking, for instance, "the grammatical class of 'shifters' "). Abandoning fundamental dialogic forms, the poetry is marked by a referential evasion and responsibility from the visual specificity of an immediate situation, so that Hölderlin " 'never describes a unique event in its peculiarity [. . .] Evidence to this effect is his strange predilection for the generalizing conjunction *when* . . .' " (Jakobson quoting F. Beissner). That context cannot be localized or indexed by pointing is a circumstance which parallels the poet's inability to speak an independent "yes" or "no," and forces him to coin the neologism *pallaksch*, which "could be taken to mean either 'yes' or 'no' and served him as a means of avoiding [both]." In "Speak, You Also," Paul Celan articulated a similar shading: "Speak— / But keep yes and no unsplit. / And give your say this meaning / give it the shade."

The consequences of response engaging or eluding responsibility to a coordinated poetics surfaces as the fundamental question in the compelling article on Majakovskij. Where critiques of Majakovskij's writing appropriate the internal conventions of his work while suppressing response to the conditions of his life as they touch the material, Jakobson sees a refusal to encounter the full range of Majakovskij's poetics, which embodies "the monolithic myth of the poem, a zealot in the name of the revolution of the spirit, a martyr condemned to cruel and hostile incomprehension and rejection." Poetic mythology enters the writing as "a unified symbolic system," encompassing the poet's desire to accelerate time to the point of reversing it (resurrection of the dead) in order to transform the future, and to escape from the destructive, inertial present moment of existence which stifles life's creative powers (this condition of stagnation is only approximated by Majakovskij's use of the Russian word *byt*). Such a mythological discourse is realized in the poet's cognitive violation of his lyrics—sacrificed in the cause of the revolution—as well as in the theme of suicide, a recurring feature throughout the poetry. "Revolution and the destruction of the poet" combine as mutually informing motifs.

Preempted by obituaries that read like ritualized critiques—reactions his work had foreseen—Majakovskij's suicide becomes "alien to the thematics of the Futurist and 'Left Front' groups." They disbelieve it: "His death cannot be reconciled with his whole life, which was that of a poet completely dedicated to the Revolution" (Malkin). "His death was unmotivated by his poetry" (*Pravda*). "Was there a general conviction," Jakobson reminds us, "that all of [his work] was only 'composed,' only invented?" "This 'antibiographical' position [is] the equivalent, in reverse, of the simplistic biographical approach."

Jakobson's implicit injunctions here represent an appeal not only to critics of his generation but to ours as well. Any evaluation of Russian

Formalist principles as applied to Majakovskij's poetry must include Jakobson's considerations of *extraliterary* materials upon the writing. It must, as Mandelstam wrote, "study the coordination of the impulse and the text." Just this is missing from Barrett Watten's primarily phonological critique of Majakovskij's "I": The word *I* in Majakovskij's poetry comes across first as sound, structuring a mode of address. This bears on the issue of the "I-writer" in Formalist theory. From this use of the pronoun it is a short step to 'literary biography as a device.' " ("Russian Formalism & The Present," in *Total Syntax*). And in "The Politics of Poetry," Watten writes: "The self might be the sign of action, as in the literary metaphor of Mayakovsky; the 'I' is a constructive device."

I cannot quarrel with the selective validity of this reading; I can only argue past it, to its limits. In light of what Jakobson calls the Russian Futurists' impulse to propel "their poetry toward the antithesis of Formalism – toward the cultivation of the heart's 'raw cry' and uninhibited frankness," Watten's position seems exclusionary in its dependence on the Formalist model. If Majakovskij's self in writing is characterized as a purely "constructive device," how implicitly collaborative is such a critique with a generation which transformed "the destruction of the poet" into what Jakobson calls "the historico-literary facts"? This is *not* to deny Majakovskij's use of "literary biography as a device" as one of his many compositional resources, but to affirm that, after the fact of the device, after the multiple layerings and graftings and repercussions of the pronominal figure had spread over the text, the terrified figure of the poet emerged unravelled, only to be posthumously constructed, and made to disappear again under the textual "facts." Watten's vision does not name and is not responsible to the "unbounded horror" of the self, seen through its pseudonyms, revealed:

> Formalist literary theory placed the lyrical monologue in quotes and disguised the "ego" of the lyric poet under a pseudonym. But what unbounded horror results when suddenly you see through the pseudonym, and the phantoms of art invade reality, just as in Majakovskij's scenario *Bound in Film* a girl is kidnapped from a movie set by a mad artist and lands in "real life."
>
> ("On a Generation that Squandered its Poets")

Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time concludes with a chapter entitled *Jakobson's Legacy*, consisting of three essays investigating, respectively, the correspondences between Jakobson's poetics and the system of language in general ("The Poetic Function and the Nature of Language," Linda R. Waugh), the application of his poetics to studies of prose ("Poetics of Prose," Krsytyna Pomorska), and a monograph motivated by Jakobson's morphological writings ("Three Main Features, Seven Basic Principles, And Eleven Most Important Results of Roman Jakobson's Morphological

Research," Igor A. Mel'chuk). On the whole these essays are valuable as informative introductions to Jakobson's work as well as original sources that test the disparate implications of his poetics. They reinforce the measure taken in the compilation of Jakobson's writings here, a gathering which complements the indispensable facts provided by his linguistic and literary research with a humanistic scholarship whose compassion and integrity will move us to address the currency of his voice for the future:

> As for the future, it doesn't belong to us either. In a few decades we shall be cruelly labelled as products of the past millennium. All we had were compelling songs of the future; and suddenly these songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history, but have been transformed into historico-literary facts. When singers have been killed and their song has been dragged into a museum and pinned to the wall of the past, the generation they represent is even more desolate, orphaned, and lost—impoverished in the most real sense of the word.
>
> ("On a Generation that Squandered its Poets")

BENJAMIN HOLLANDER

THE MAN NAMED EAST AND OTHER POEMS
Peter Redgrove
Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985

Listen to titles. Titles as incantations: *The Grain-Shaped Cave, The Dead and Their Children, Dance the Putrefact,* The Primate of the Rose, The Walk to the Paradise Garden, Song of the Springtides, Ancient Lights, The Isle of Lies, *The Sire of Branches and Air,* The Brazen Head, The Glamour of the Snow, the Goat Foot God, The Death Hound, The Nightside of Eden, *The Will of November,* Children of the Wind, *Excrementitious Husk,* The Club of Queer Trades, *The God of Restraint,* The Forgotten Rite, The Temptation of the Clay, Cults of the Shadow, *The Whole Music at Pod's Kitchen,* The House of Sounds, Wolf Solent, *Tantric Friends, The Shrinking Clock,* Moon Glade, This Knot of Life, *Using the Dark,* Children of the Pool, *The Doctrine of the Window,* The Scarlet Ceremonies, The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew, The Power House, *The Larynx in the Hill,* The Hill of Dreams, Casting the Runes, Ashe of Rings, Winter Waters, *Too Old For Bones,* The Anathema of Zos, *The Numina at the Street Parties,* The Man Who Was Thursday, *The Man*

Named East, Avalon of the Heart, *The Earth Shakes Away Its Dead Like Crumbs From a Cloth, To the Water-Psychiatrist*, The Candle of Vision, The Column of Dust, and The Story of My Heart. These titles are evocative of the old England, of Celts and druidic lore, stone circles, megaliths and ritual magic. The England summoned in the titles of stories, novels, autobiographies, occult manuals, tone-poems and piano suites by Frederick Delius, John Cowper Powys, Mary Butts, M.R. James, Arnold Bax, Evelyn Underhill, Kenneth Grant, G.K. Chesterton, Arthur Machen, Dion Fortune, M.P. Shiel, John Ireland, Algernon Blackwood, AE, Austin Osman Spare, and—in italics—Peter Redgrove.

Despite a considerable presence in England, Redgrove is virtually unknown in the U.S. He hasn't been taken up by word of mouth among those Englishmen who have formed associations in this country, probably because of his extensive BBC exposure, literary prizes, and enthusiastic press coverage of his books published over a 25 year period by the prestigious firm of Routledge and Kegan Paul. He's not fashionably neglected. But to be blunt: Redgrove is, with J.H. Prynne, the most commanding poet now writing in English outside North America.

In addition, he's the first genuinely visionary English poet since William Blake. He was careful to specify (in an interview I did with him in 1973) that in poetry, visionary matters are "visions of matter." "I'm a materialist, you see, but I'm a materialist in the Hindu tradition, which regards matter as a song . . . I find that it is very easy to think of matter as being conscious on a molecular level."* Many would agree, but few can manifest their attentions on this exacting plane in poems, nor sustain it over decades.

Redgrove's publishing career goes back to 1960, but aside from intimations of his powers in *The Force* (1966), it was only with the dual publication of his novel *In the Country of the Skin* and its companion volume *Dr Faust's Sea-Spiral Spirit* in 1972 that he fully came into possession of his visionary nature and the fortitude necessary to shape the renewed abundance of creativity. *In the Country of the Skin* is one of the generous healing books of our time. An insatiable libidinal florescence at its core, the book is really a prose-poem (comparable to Lautréamont—it's that good) and has become the oracular font of all Redgrove's subsequent work.

The dominant impulse immediately following *In the Country of the Skin* was the fantasy of hermaphroditic collaboration. Redgrove and his wife, Penelope Shuttle, worked together on two novels (*The Terrors of Dr. Treviles* and *The Glass Cottage*), a book of poetry (*The Hermaphrodite*

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Album) and a scholarly study (*The Wise Wound*, about menstruation in women's psychology and in various cultures). While these books were not altogether successful (literary collaborations rarely are as satisfying as collaborations in other media), they still proved a marvelous grounding for Redgrove's subsequent flexibility at delineating inter-sexual and inter-species perceptions. Since that collaborative period, Redgrove's focus has been binuclear. The urges fused in *In the Country of the Skin* has spawned two distinct pursuits. On the one hand this has resulted in a series of novels (*The God of Glass, The Sleep of the Great Hypnotist, The Beekeepers* and *The Facilitators*) that are diverting entertainments, pesky romps of occult scientists and their peculiar institutions, metaphysical apparitions, masques in prose. Aspiring to be read as novels, the plasmic vista of *In the Country of the Skin* is diffused (though the novels *are* fun to read). It's in the poetry that *Skin*'s germinating impulse has been maintained. In 1977 the huge collection of poems *From Every Chink of the Ark* (250 pages) showed much determination to tap the organic currents of *Skin* and transform the prose book's libidinal vision into poetry – too eagerly, I think, muddling the force of the book and leaving many of the poems looking like workshop shatter. But by *The Weddings at Nether-Powers* (1979) the transfusion was complete, and has continued with ever greater refinement, exactitude and energy. With *Weddings, The Apple-Broadcast* (1981) and now *The Man Named East* (1985) we have nearly 500 pages of formidable visionary poetry with scarcely a bruised apple in the bunch.

We now have the pleasure of watching in Redgrove a poet at the summit of his command, ceaselessly inventive and *at ease* in that invention – in fact, fluent, as if the medium of the poem were another language, now mastered – a pleasure reminiscent of that which must have attended the appearance of *Parts of a World, Transport to Summer* and *The Auroras of Autumn* from 1942 to 1950. It's not an idle comparison. Stevens is so readily taken up as the American master, but his presence is no less keen in England for that, and one of the turning points in Redgrove's life as a poet was in "The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach" (from *Work in Progress*, 1968), as prime an instance as one can imagine of Harold Bloom's obsession with poet-sons pinning poet-fathers on the wrestling mat of genealogy. But there are differences. For Stevens, imagination was the medium through which a certain resolution of the world into tolerable issue was conducted. For Redgrove, imagination is the very resolution it enacts. "The proper state of mind is inspiration . . . it's a state of being in love with the world without ignoring anything about it."

The narrative impulse has not been drained from the poems, despite Redgrove's fertility as a novelist. The quality – the *aura* – of story pervades his poems. Content to pack his novels with the wild improbabilities of plot his vivid imagination is capable of, he reserves for the poems a wealth of details which are the pregnant carriers of narrative potential. The

submerged (rarely overt) narration, in turn, serves as a check to the lyrical momentum and keeps the poems from piling up into catalogues of registered percepts. Some of the more obviously narrative poems in *The Man Named East* can serve as useful points of entry for readers not familiar with the work: "The Brothel in Fairyland," "Light Black Redskin," "The Witch Who Loves Us," and "The Quiet Woman of Chancery Lane." Not that these are conventionally narrative in any sense; the action inheres in the atmosphere sustained, that *here* is a world *in which things happen.* The mind's attachment to the poem becomes the action.

A notable gain in this collection is the refinement of Redgrove's aptitute for simile. So strongly does his mind generate analogy on many levels that, throughout his career as a poet, there has been a tendency for poems to lose force and focus, following the lure of "like . . ." The abundance of similes here is unobtrusive, appearing with greater care in contexts where they serve the poem above all, yet function as agents to captivate the reader with the aptness of the comparisons. In a pharmacy a moth flits from jar to jar "like a travelling label"; rooks wheel above the trees like little cinders, "Cinders that cry with the cold"; trees appear as "great lungs smelling of grass"; the forest is like "a vast moth / Settling its wings on the hill"; the sea is "like a wet tree shaking out white blossom," while rain falls like "bells in an infinite number / All descending on the one note." Captivated by the cumulous cloud of autumn sensations, the poet says "My heart leaps in my chest like a cat / With a silver sheen on it jumping over the well."

The fund of tangible transformations the natural world affords in all its seasonal and climatic variety is immense. Redgrove's increasingly sharp ability to trace the simple simile has been modulated into that magical concision which registers perceptions as transformations of what is witnessed. Two memorable poems literally clothe air and water in the attention paid them, in these selections:

> The red blouse pulsing on the line,
> Emptying and filling like a heart
>
> In the strong gusts,
> The wind's heart beating on the line . . .
>
> (from "The Heart")

> . . . I have seen
> A smooth rock standing
> In a waterfall, dressed
>
> In a never-ending weave
> Of water-trails down the stream,
> A twisted glass shirt like a flame,

Like a personage
On whose head light beats
And refines him utterly down to the tail

During many centuries.

(from "Like a Rock")

Elsewhere we stand witness to "the skin of wind moulded to the hills," "the tidal cattle lowing to and fro," and shadows growing from the trees like bears – the same trees, perhaps, that are "worried by their wolf, / The wind." The similes grow more and more concise, abrupt, hidden, adept. They alter like tadpoles into metaphor. The poem "A Kinsman" opens with a single, striking, verbless line: "Echoes, the cadavers of noises, bloated." This is a point of ignition, a key. The concision is like a condensation on the glass of the poems' surfaces, small liquid pellets which potentiate the images seen through them. Modes of empowering perception with its proper inspiration (seeing is another kind of breathing).

There's an occult rite Kenneth Grant cites in *Outside the Circles of Time* called the Mass of the Mirror, involving the ritual placement of reflecting glasses in conjunction with certain alignments of the stars, sexual arousal and verbally intoxicating invocations. Redgrove's frequent citation of the image of the mirror in *The Man Named East* may or may not derive from this rite, but it's very much in the spirit of it. It's a rite of conception, insemination. A rite involved with "the mirror of the womb, / The sticky mirror, flypaper of spirits / Where they catch a-dying ninety years." It is, of course, the oldest of alchemical retentions – "as above, so below" – where wheat, that Eleusinian vegetal collaborator, composes "lunar images of the reflecting field, / The infinite mirror / Of wheat whose tops are tidal / And whose roots are grave" and is the tactile sign of shared initiation (and, Mystery of mysteries! – who isn't an initiate to that?). The image is primal, familiar, yet always arresting: "The body is the glass in which we see his spirit darkly. / Now the glass is broken he is invisible." The diction is as plain and spare as Stevens'. The prosody as compact, at times, as Bunting: "The spark-gap at the thorn's tip / Where the water-drop flashes." And the closing line of "The Heart" cited earlier: "The fly so full of low sweetness it hums like rubbed crystal." Such apt fit of thought to sound is a Mystery as well.

It is Redgrove's most inscrutable and illustrious ability, this knack of identifying with insects. There's no heroism in it, no heralding the spider over the fly. It is blatant adoration of the whole of creation, simple as that. "The touch of breeze is the whole of the stars." And "Every atom receives the whole." A simple platitude, but Redgrove ceaselessly amplifies:

He was very relaxed, and his senses, like fibres

Had expanded to ever corner of his airy room.
A single fly entered. It was a little torso of fluid

It was a little water-bell carved with a mask.
It had squeezed the grasses to fill itself,
It had distilled in the sunshine many dungs

And sang such a luminous note,
A green light in it.

(from "The Comforter")

The same credence attaches to all the life that splurges on lower matter, from the "ingot-bright slugs condemned / To trailing wingless in sweet slime" to the "fat moths" who "stare at us with big gold buttons / Or enter in like aerial puppies / To lap at our candles." To concentrate on such observations, to persist in attending to the very small, is to continually reappraise the scale of human potential, and to see the monumental flare of imagination pouring into the tiniest instance of enraptured attention:

The lunar month is a pinioned giant
Held by rachets of seconds, to which

It is gigantic, seen by the wheeling minute;
Each cog floats by like a mote of pulses
In the great eye of the year.

But we need the second's flying eye
To enter by, its eye and understanding . . .

(from "Serpent of the Month Club")

It is an awesome potential of a man, that wombless creature, to strive in vision and imagination to a state of maternal solicitude and cellular reveries of morphological growth. The opening poem of *The Weddings at Nether-Powers*, "The Visible Baby," had envisioned the intra-uterine first spasms of foetal growth. That vision is continued here:

. . . Now she dreams

Of putting the final touches to the firstborn,
Knitting the baby's only garment with bone needles,
Engraving on the flesh the fingerprints like a colophon.

(from "Lights in the Mist")

And that "child soaked in darkness" is

. . . a hieroglyph of the nine gods,

The nine months of gestation,

The little orchestra of the watch, the nine months'
Watch, the percussion-group of the heart
Bent over its round measurer.

(from "The Drumming Stars")

Here, as throughout Redgrove's work, all that is out of sight, hidden away, or customarily regarded as inanimate is precisely what is animated. Not through any cartoon-like grotesquerie, but out of the instantaneous shared recognition between sentient creatures of a life undertaken together on earth. It's a conception of organic life as being inherently of use to other forms of life, not strictly on the make for its own fitful survival. "Man is a device / For harvesting the abundant details of the woman, / Woman a busy press of the plain juices of the man."

In 1968 D.M. Thomas wrote of Redgrove's poems that "It is impossible – such is their ambivalent atmosphere – to say whether these are 'love' poems or 'nature' poems. Which means that they are religious poems." I would suggest changing that word to "reverent" to steer it clear of any ecclesiastical associations (though Redgrove can be highly illuminating on the pagan background of Cornish Christianity – see "The Green Tower" and "Killing House"). The reverence hails from the hush of attention, the adoration which inspired perception is endowed with. A section from "The Funeral" (with its auspicious opening – "Clouds and mountains were invited, both the conscious / And the unconscious creatures") will suffice for what I mean;

There is a Witness, I think, who has magnetic wings.
First it seemed to me at the funeral service with the terrible
Useless brass handles that would be saved screwed to
The veneer cardboard coffin which was much too small
That my emotions such as these swirled round my flesh
And some of them spurted from my eyes but ninety-two percent
Were beating in my back in a sensation like spread wings.
Since mine were sprouting I was able to see
The wings of others, such as my father's, standing next to me,
And his were ragged and tattered like those of an old moth,
Close to drying up and drifting away, it seemed my duty
To merge my birth-wet wings with his, and this I did,
Entwining them in an embrace with him that he would never know,
And sure enough he, the widower, perked up,
And I felt tattered, but not dry, for back at the house
I sobbed my heart out in the little white-tiled loo,
And there was still a little angelic witness lodged in my spine
At the small of my back, in Jesus-robes, little calm watcher
In white, which I cannot explain, merely report.

Writing like this brings to mind the psychologist James Hillman's insistence that we need to establish a ground of seriousness that is not tragic. As this passage from "The Funeral" indicates in abundance, good humor even in the most stressful circumstances, if held onto, can turn its charmed Buddha countenance on the passing scene and permit a glimpse of that levity to which everything in its own best nature aspires. Peter Redgrove is resolutely (as M.P. Shiel said of Arthur Machen) "a singer somehow of the truth that the universe is bacchic and deserves an emotion . . ."

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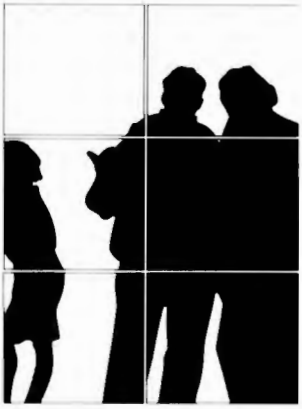

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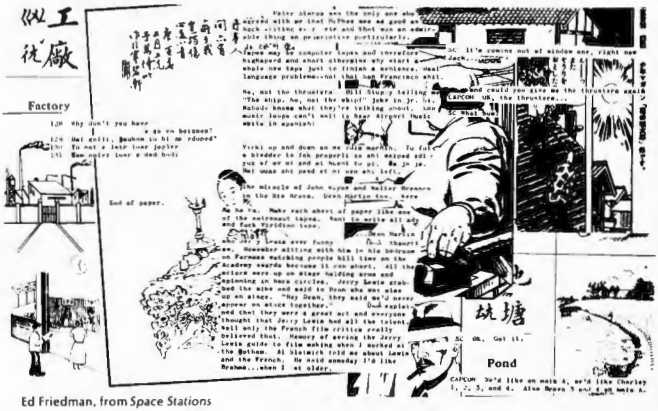

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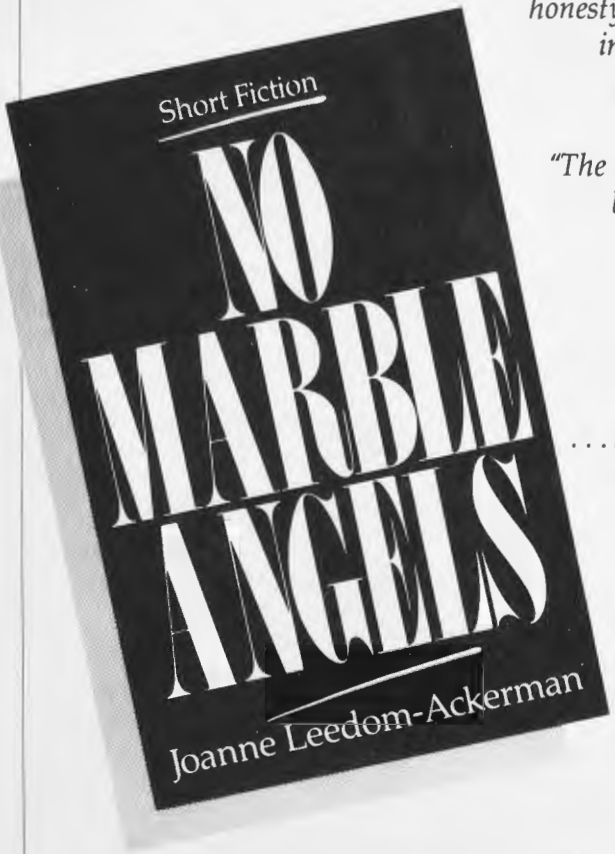

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